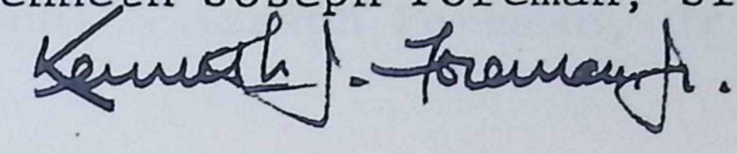
THE DEBATE ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF MISSIONS LED BY JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 1839 - 1861

by

Kenneth Joseph Foreman, Jr.



A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of

Princeton Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

Princeton

Mercer County

New Jersey

1977

Copyright © 1977 by Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr.

Part 1: Pages i - 409

M
G
F7
v.

ABSTRACT OF

THE DEBATE ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF MISSIONS LED BY JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 1839 - 1861

by

Kenneth Joseph Foreman, Jr.

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of

Princeton Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

Princeton

Mercer County

New Jersey

1977

Copyright © 1977 by Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr.

LL-LIII-77

Gift of The Author

ABSTRACT

By 1837-1838 the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America reemphasized Presbyterian distinctives enough to shed four ninths of itself into a New School General Assembly which was glad to modify Westminster confessionalism and Presbyterian church government in favor of New England theology and congregational polity, and to abandon Presbyterian denominational mission programs in favor of the Voluntary Societies. The five ninths remaining in the Old School General Assembly were agreed that in obeying the Great Commission the Church as Church should herself carry out the evangelical enterprise.

In Baltimore, Kentuckian Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, father of the revolutionary 1837-1838 reform, concluded by 1840 that Presbyterian Boards were in fact as independent of the church as voluntary societies were. He launched public debate on their validity. Virginian Benjamin Mosby Smith supported him with criticism of the Boards' fund-raising system of Agents.

Enlisting James Henley Thornwell of South Carolina gave this debate its most remembered leader. But Thomas Smyth of Charleston joined forces with Foreign Mission Board Secretary Walter Lowrie of Pennsylvania to defeat Thornwell's proposals

on the floor of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia in 1840. Thornwell's classic paper, Smyth's review of it, and Thornwell's reply, subsequently appeared in Breckinridge's Baltimore magazines.

Hitherto overlooked but of profound importance to any responsible Twentieth Century attempt to construct a relevant theology of ministry, mission or church, New Englander John Calkins Coit of Harmony Presbytery applied Thornwell's program powerfully to the Presbytery level. Coit's radical, detailed, incisive call for an unrestricted, free and prophetic ministry at home and abroad, unbound and undistorted by any temporal, cultural, sectional, national, political, economic or bureaucratic influences or deformations, repays close and thoughtful attention. But Harmony Presbytery's able American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Africa Missionary, John Leighton Wilson, distinguished future Board executive, rejected its overseas application entirely.

The twenty-year debate attracted among others Benjamin Gildersleeve of Charleston, Stuart Robinson of Virginia, John Bailey Adger of Columbia, William Swan Plumer of Pennsylvania, Henry Augustus Boardman of Philadelphia, and Charles Hodge of Princeton.

The large new evangelical works of the Nineteenth Century posed a dilemma: if they were in the main carried on outside the organizational structure of the churches, the churches would wither as the center of Christian life shifted away. But if the churches absorbed these works into their denominational structures, the works would transform the churches into something unrecognizable. Hodge and the Old School as a whole saw the first horn of the dilemma; the group led by Thornwell saw both.

The debate turns on the nature of the Church and of individual and corporate responsibility to obey the Great Commission. Empathy for the intellectual and spiritual convictions of the participants is necessary to understand their positions.

Since the Boards are still a major feature of American church life, the ground debated continues fresh and relevant. The background and development of the debate are presented; the arguments analyzed; the predictions of the debaters noted at appropriate points for checking against actual subsequent events; and Thornwell's life, with particular attention to the mainsprings of his ecclesiastical and spiritual convictions, is analyzed as a key to understanding the basis for and implications of the attack on the Board system.

The group led by Thornwell saw that the system of Boards flatly contradicted the Presbyterian approach to finding the will of God in the church and carrying it out; that the Boards would distort the Presbyterian church immediately by controlling it; and that in the long run the Boards would permanently destroy the Presbyterian Church: when carrying out the Great Commission was left to the Boards, Presbyterian individual and corporate Christian life would atrophy because the Church had abandoned her only excuse for existence and had farmed her vital work out to agents.

Their preferred solution was to extirpate the Boards root and branch. This the Presbyterian Church rejected.

The reformers' alternative palliative reforms were strongly resisted but finally adopted in their entirety.

Contrary to received stereotypes, Thornwell emerges as a warm, life-affirming non-academic personality, who (like Coit) was essentially radical and revolutionary in his basic positions.

Hitherto unavailable resources drawn on include a previously unknown eye-witness account of Thornwell as a preacher, and the important unpublished 1860 Travel and Presbyterian General Assembly Diary of Presbyterian elder Dr. Robert A. Archer, M. D.

The Bibliography includes unusually complete listings of available General Assembly, Synod and Presbytery Minutes of Presbyterian and Reformed bodies in the southern United States, and of relevant primary-source periodicals.

As an aside, the notion that their positions on slavery distinguished the New School from the Old School at the Presbyterian disruption of 1837-1838 is demolished.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section — Page

INTRODUCTORY

XUM Publication Date i

XUM Title Page with Order Number . . . ii

Title, Presentation, and Copyright . . . iii

Abstract Title Page iv

Abstract v

Table of Contents ix

Foreword xiii

Acknowledgements and Appreciation . . . xvi

Introduction xxxi

PROLOGUE

The Mind and the Classic 1

BACKGROUND

The Setting: A Brief Review of the History of the American Churches . . . 13

The Dilemma Posed to the American Churches by the Rise of Corporate Christian Benevolence 20

The Presbyterian Division of 1837-1838 . . 23

The Presbyterian Situation at the Close of 1838 41

THE DEBATE

I. OPENING MOVES

The Enlistment of James Henley Thornwell . 46

Breckinridge of Baltimore Opens Fire . . 70

Benjamin Mosby Smith Drops Some Hints . . 85

II. THORNWELL VERSUS SMYTH

James Henley Thornwell Writes a Classic . . . 93

Thomas Smyth and Walter Lowrie Cooperate . 99

The Valley of the Shadow 130

Thomas Smyth Makes a Serious Review . . 143

A Voyage Into Life 185

Thornwell Replies to a Serious Review . . 206

III. COIT VERSUS WILSON

John Calkins Coit Undertakes a Revolution . 244

Benjamin Gildersleeve Thinks Otherwise . . 313

Harmony Presbytery Mutes the Blast . . . 318

John Leighton Wilson Demurs 322

Coit or Wilson: The Nature of the Choice . 333

IV. INTERLUDE: WIDER FIELDS

Meanwhile, the General Assembly . . . 343

V. ROBINSON VERSUS HODGE

Princeton Gets Involved; and
India Missionary Rankin Offers a Statistic . 367

Charles Hodge Sheds a Dark Light . . . 378

Stuart Robinson Corrects Charles Hodge . . 390

VI. INTERLUDE: THE NATURE OF THE PROTAGONIST

James Henley Thornwell 410

VII. FINAL MOVES

The Two-Level Attack 435

Systematic Benevolence:
Palliative Revolution 442

The Reformers' Pressure Increases . . . 452

Stuart Robinson Analyzes the Situation . . 458

Three Ex-Moderators Prove
Stuart Robinson Right 466

Four Years of Uncertainty 479

VIII. CLIMAX

Dr. Robert A. Archer Makes His Way . . . 500

Confrontation in Rochester 521

EPILOGUE

The Terrible Swift Sword 535

Conclusions 539

The Classic 548

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE 579

I. Primary Sources

A. Manuscript materials 580

B. Minutes 589

C. Periodicals 612

D. Articles 626

E. Pamphlets 637

F. Books 647

II. Reference Works 665

III. Bibliographies and Indexes 674

IV. Secondary Sources

A. Dissertations, theses, and unpublished scholarly manuscripts . 685

B. Periodicals 696

C. Articles 699

D. Books 712

FOREWORD

This dissertation has grown out of the author's interest in the nature and effect of the administration of Christian missions at home and abroad. It deals with Presbyterian mission administration in part because the author is a Presbyterian and knows more about that particular persuasion of Christianity than any other; and in part because Presbyterians, by their literary compulsions and inability to throw all of their records away, have among all the North American Protestant denominations left one of the fuller accounts of their thinking and doing in this field.

The reader may properly inquire how it was that the author's interest was aroused. The answer is: very simply, very naturally, and over a period of two decades during which he was himself engaged in the work of Presbyterian missions.

This took place first where the Big and Little Horse Creeks come down from the Tennessee and Virginia borders to join the headwaters of the New River in Ashe County in the mountains of North Carolina, under the auspices of the home mission enterprise of the Synod of North Carolina and the Presbytery of Winston-Salem of the Presbyterian Church in the United States; second in the overseas mission undertakings of the China Mission of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America

and in the home mission undertakings of the Yunnan Mission of the Church of Christ in China; and third in the overseas mission work of the Korea Mission of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, of the Korea Mission of the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and of the Korea Mission of the Australian Presbyterian Church; and in the home mission work of the Presbyterian Church in Korea.

No one who puts himself into as diverse a set of operations as these -- often simultaneously, in our present system of cooperative and interlocked projects where people are lent and seconded from organization to organization as a matter of course and often as a matter of requirement -- can easily remain unaware of the differing effects of differing methods of work and administration on the practical results achieved by groups of workers otherwise equally well qualified and devoted. But at the same time, the old-line North American mission boards happened to choose these two decades of the author's service for successive major modifications of their policy. The Presbyterians were no exception, and the effects on the field were profound. Returning to the United States in 1964 for study furlough and to make a home for his father, the author took advantage of the superb facilities of Princeton Theological Seminary to search, at the graduate-study level, for an answer to the question of how modern Presbyterian mission administration had reached its present structure and philosophy. A flexible and interested Department of Church History, and a generous comity arrangement with Princeton University, provided a background for coverage of the field from the days of the early church to the present, across all Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant lines; and the author's subsequent call to

the work of the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, in Montreat, North Carolina, placed him in an atmosphere best described as saturated with original sources for the study of all aspects of Presbyterian mission undertakings, foreign and domestic, ancient, modern and contemporary.

In the author's family the tradition for some generations has been to undertake, if possible, advanced graduate study as an outgrowth of serious professional endeavors rather than as a preliminary to them. This can cause complications, which an informed native enthusiasm may increase as much as it illuminates; but the results can be interesting as well as helpful. These pages have been so to their author. If they prove to be so to the reader as well, the thanks will be due to a kind Providence and to a persistent Department of Church History.

--- Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr.

Montreat, North Carolina
May 20, 1977

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND APPRECIATION

The writer is greatly indebted to the body of men who in the midst of hard-working pastoral, academic, literary, scholarly, administrative, business, governmental, agricultural, domestic and argumentative Christian lives took the time to write down what they had on their minds and send the results to friends, family, enemies, editors and/or publishers who either kept or printed the pages; and also to those who, hearing speeches, motions, counter-motions, debates, conversations, conferences, dialogs and soliloquies (all otherwise as ephemeral as words on the wind) wrote down what they thought they heard and either saved that record or got it into print.

Then to the inconspicuous, usually unsung, collectors, often descended from long lines of old string savers, who housed, sheltered, preserved and eventually catalogued, indexed, even reproduced these records of

another day and sold the reproductions at cost or less to the pilgrim leaning on his Volkswagen Microbus, must go the sincerest of thanks. Among them, Mr. E. L. Inabinett, Librarian, and his staff, of the South Caroliniana Library of the University of South Carolina, are the guardians of the largest single body of documents by or to James Henley Thornwell. Mr. Alexander P. Clark, Curator of Manuscripts, and his colleagues, at the Princeton University Library, are in the same relationship to Charles Hodge. It would be difficult to say which institution and which staff is the more thoughtful, helpful and considerate to the visitor. They both set the highest of standards and are remembered with pleasure and warm thanks by all who venture within their beautifully equipped, beautifully run facilities.

To the Library of Congress, which houses the Breckinridge Family papers; to the University of North Carolina, which holds the Anderson and Thornwell Family Papers in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina Library; and to Dr. Mattie Russell, Curator, and her staff, of the Manuscript Department of the William R. Perkins Library of

Duke University, where Thornwell, Plumer, Palmer, Dabney and numerous other letters are magnificently indexed and readily found in their resting places within a dozen or more collections, including the George Frederick Holmes Collection, I am indebted for timely counsel and ready assistance at every needed point.

Of course my thanks are in inadequate measure to the splendid resources of Speer Library of Princeton Theological Seminary and her many helpful staff members, beginning with Librarians Dr. Kenneth S. Gapp and Dr. Louis Charles Willard, who have extended every courtesy to the researcher; and I am particularly grateful for the patience and helpfulness of Speer's gracious and knowledgeable Research Librarian, Dr. John Irvine. To Dr. John B. Trotti, Librarian, and Mrs. B. D. Aycock, Reference Librarian, of the senior Union Theological Seminary, as to General Manager William B. Miller and Research Historian Gerald Gillette of the Presbyterian Historical Society, I owe warm thanks for personal friendship and encouragement as well as for professional assistance rendered in the midst of pressing duties and responsibilities.

For their assistance and courtesy I am indebted to Mary Elizabeth Ambler, Librarian of the Margaret Leggat Butler Library at The Lindenwood Colleges; Mr. Robert Anderson, Librarian of the Lyons Memorial Library at the School of the Ozarks; Robert G. Bailey, Librarian of the Clifton M. Miller Library at Washington College; Harriet Barkley, Librarian of the Limestone College Library; Rose Marie Beischer, Reference Archivist of Emory University; Rose K. Belk of Colonial Williamsburg; James R. Bentley, Curator of Manuscripts at The Filson Club, in Louisville; Kathleen Blow, of the Reference Department at the Library of The University of Texas at Austin; Mary Boccaccio, Archivist at the McKeldin Library of The University of Maryland; Mrs. Nancy G. Boles, Curator of Manuscripts at the Maryland Historical Society, in Baltimore; Wanda J. Calhoun, Head Librarian at Eckerd College; D. E. Carroll, of the John Storrs Fletcher Library of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; Burton Cesare, Acting Chairman of The Department of Special Collections at the University Libraries of the University of Florida; Miss Margaret L. Chapman, Director of the Library at the Everett Library of Queens College; Howson W. Cole, Curator of Manuscripts at the Virginia Historical So-

ciety in Richmond; Bobby Coleman, Secretary for Archives of the Historical Library and Archives of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church; Miss Margaret C. Cook, Curator of Manuscripts of the Earl Gregg Swem Library at the College of William and Mary in Virginia; Otis Coefield, Librarian of the Hardy Library at Atlantic Christian College; Professor Chalmers G. Davidson, Director of the Library of Davidson College; Miss Ruth Corry, Head of the Central Research Division at the Department of Archives and History of the State of Georgia; Mrs. W. L. Davis, Head Librarian of the Martha S. Grafton Library at Mary Baldwin College; John Dobson, Librarian for Special Collections at the Library of The University of Tennessee; Mary Fisher, Reference Librarian at the Corriher-Linn-Black Library of Catawba College; Paul L. Grier, Librarian of the Eggleston Library at Hampden-Sydney College; Mrs. Connie G. Griffith, Director, Special Collections Division at the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library of Tulane University; Mrs. E. C. Goodall, of the Manuscripts Division of the Milton S. Eisenhower Library of the Johns Hopkins University; Thera Hambrick, Director of the Library at the Richard Holmes Powell Library of Valdosta State College; Richard Hart, Chairman of the

Humanities Department at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore; Harriet Heidelberg, Assistant Librarian of the Department of Archives and History of The State of Mississippi; Elizabeth Holmes, Acquisitions Librarian of the De Tamble Library at St. Andrews Presbyterian College; Milo B. Howard, Jr., Director of the Department of Archives and History of the State of Alabama; Herbert Hucks, Jr., Archivist at the Sandor Teszler Library of Wofford College; Mary M. Jenkins, Librarian of the Department of Archives and History of the State of West Virginia; Albert M. Johnson, Librarian of the Burrow Library at Southwestern At Memphis; The Reverend Calvin Klemt, Librarian of the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Mrs. Betty R. Kondayan, Assistant Head, Reference and Public Services at the Cyrus Hall McCormick Library of Washington and Lee University; John H. Landrum, Director of Reader Services at the South Carolina State Library; Aline L. Legg, Archivist at the Arthur Hopkins Library of Austin College; Lucile Lehmann of the Library of the College of Charleston; Donald R. Lennon, Director of the East Carolina Manuscript Collection at East Carolina University; Mrs. Barney M. Lewis, Head, Southern History and Literature Department at the Birmingham Public

Library; Mr. Guy Logsdon, Director of the McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa; Rosamond McCanless, Archivist at the James Branch Cabell Library of Virginia Commonwealth University; Mrs. Anne McDonnell, Librarian of the Kentucky Historical Society; Mary McRory, Reference Librarian of The Florida State Library; Warren R. Mehl, Librarian of Eden Theological Seminary; Dan Metts, of the Stetson Memorial Library at Mercer University; Leon C. Metz, Archivist of the Library of The University of Texas at El Paso; Kathleen Miller of the Reference Department of the Charleston County Library; Virginia Mounce, Archivist of the Library of Trinity University; Lillian Newman of McCain Library at Agnes Scott College; Mrs. Gregorie Nowell, Assistant Secretary of the Huguenot Society of South Carolina; Robert A. Olsen, Jr., Librarian at Brite Divinity School of Texas Christian University; Mrs. T. G. Owen, Librarian at the Walter Hines Page Library of Randolph-Macon College; Nancy Parker, Director of the Woodson Research Center at The Fondren Library of Rice University; Dorothy Ruth Parks, Public Services Librarian of the Joint University Libraries in Nashville; David E. Parsley, Librarian at the E. W. King Library of King College; Mrs. Granville T. Prior,

Director of the South Carolina Historical Society; James H. Rogers, University Librarian at the Moody Memorial Library of Baylor University; Mrs. R. C. Rowland, Reference Librarian of the Lipscomb Library at Randolph-Macon Woman's College; Virginia Rugheimer, Librarian of the Charleston Library Society; Jane Savage, Librarian at Lamar Memorial Library of Maryville College; Charles R. Schultz, University Archivist at the University Library of Texas A&M University; Annette H. Shinn, Reference Librarian at the Dacus Library at Winthrop College; Samuel A. Sizer, Curator, Special Collections at the University Library of the University of Arkansas; Frank E. Smith, Reference Librarian of Radford College; Addie F. Spence, Reference Librarian at the Collis P. Huntington Memorial Library at Hampton Institute; P. Earl Strowbridge, Curator of the Special Collections Division of the Preston Library at Virginia Military Institute; Mrs. Priscilla H. Sutcliffe, Special Collections Librarian of the Robert Muldrow Cooper Library at Clemson University; Douglas W. Tanner, Assistant in Manuscripts at the Manuscripts Department of the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia; Mrs. William Tate, Assistant Special Collections Librarian at the University Libraries of the University of Georgia;

Catherine Traynham, of the South Carolina Historical Society in Charleston; Cleo Treadway, Librarian of Tusculum College; James R. Wagner, Librarian of the Reformed Theological Seminary; Mrs. Ruth Warren, Head of the Special Collections Division of the Mobile Public Library; Rebecca E. Weant, Assistant Librarian of the Rowan Public Library; Ernest M. White, Librarian of the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Mrs. Richard P. Willis, of the Local History and Genealogy Department at the Orlando Public Library; John A. Witmer, of the Mosher Library at Dallas Theological Seminary; John R. Woodard of the Z. Smith Reynolds Library of Wake Forest University; and to the Librarians of the Julia Rogers Library of Goucher College; the Handley Library in Winchester, Virginia; the Librarian of the Lovely Lane United Methodist Church on St. Paul Street in Baltimore, Maryland; the Carlyle Campbell Library of Meredith College; the Salem College Library; and to the Librarian and staff of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

Then what shall I say of the Historical Foundation of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, in Montreat, North Carolina? Her collections of manuscripts,

journals, correspondence, periodicals, minutes, reports and archival materials have been a joy to explore during this undertaking. They have given me some idea of what Dr. H. Shelton Smith meant when he wrote, some years ago, that they have made the Historical Foundation the one indispensable respository of primary source material for the study of the religious history of the United States of the 19th Century.

To Dr. Samuel Mills Tenney and Dr. Thomas Hugh Spence, Jr., who collected these holdings; to Mrs. Michael N. Lane, Librarian, who can read the researcher's mind and lay hands on what she is looking for with uncanny accuracy and unfailing good humor; to the late Professor Elizabeth S. Hoyt, Research Associate, for helpful suggestions in the early stages of the work; to Dr. Ruth D. See, Research Associate, whose wide background and keen insight make many a complicated or tedious task into something efficient and charming; to Mrs. Kay L. Stockdale, Assistant Librarian, who in the midst of a massive periodical project brought to light a number of items that would have escaped all ordinary nets; to Mrs. Helen E. LaBonte, ever ready and efficient master of the materials in the Local Church History Program and the catalog cards; and

to Miss Lannae Graham, Archivist of the Historical Foundation, whose competent cataloging, arranging and Finding Aids make trim gardens where in earlier days thick lush unsorted jungle met the explorer's eye; to each of these my thanks are simply beyond competent expression.

However full the mind and file cabinet may become with the help of generous staffs far and near, there still remains the hard intractable gap between hopeful note and typescript. If in scanning anywhere among these pages which follow, the reader finds something of interest or help, then the debt, like mine, is to Mrs. Josephine de la Torre Christensen, Mrs. Mary Frances Ogden Foreman, Mrs. Frances Ogden Foreman Garber, Mrs. Barbara Field Hinkle, Miss Wanda Maitland, and Miss Morna Moore, who take the machines of our times; aim at perfection; come closer to it than some angels; and have been generous in their energies past measure.

If beyond mere interest the reader finds here any wealth or treasure, that reader joins a large company: the reader has become a Xerox millionaire. This is thanks to Mrs. Linda Rubey Lane and Miss Morna Moore, at your Historical Foundation, and to their brothers and sisters at a

score of other lairs of learning. They get down on their knees to these temperamental piles of Goldberg's folly. Together with men like Mr. Charles Thompson, Technical Representative of the Organization, they keep the selenium rolling despite its mystic round of mispuff, smoke, and flame. When either they or Xerox fold -- and this includes the unseen sybarites of University Microfilm who bring you all this by courtesy of Xerox their parent and sponsor -- we will be spectator most probably to the breakdown of civilization as we know it, and certainly to the decline and fall of the modern doctoral dissertation.

The writer is indebted to a number of scholars in ways beyond those for which thanks can be adequately conveyed. From Miss Maude Vinson of Davidson he learned never to stop asking questions of a good teacher; from Professor Louis E. Smith of Mount Hermon he learned that details count. Dr. Leslie Hotson of Haverford showed him what the detective and enthusiast in a scholar can do, and Dr. Benjamin Rice Lacy of the senior Union Theological Seminary demonstrated finally and forever that there is only one ministry at the core of our calling, without which all our specialities wither at the root; and it is pastoral. Professor T. L.

Wang of Yale taught him that the true scholar must be both a poet and cook as well as the master of ten thousand characters; and that those who doubt that this is so, betray their insularity as children of a parochial West. Dr. Andrew K. Rule of the former Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary encouraged him to go after and depend on the primary sources, and Professor Horace Grant Underwood of Yonsei University taught him to nail down documentation against the unseen as well as the predicted storm. Dr. John Oliver Nelson of Yale offered to his pupil of thirty years standing the most usable analysis of neo-orthodoxy he has yet encountered, as well as a high standard in dissertations to ponder. While a Research Fellow of Yale University the writer became immeasurably indebted to Dr. Claude Welch, then of that Faculty, in attending his lectures at Yale Divinity School on modern theologians. Professor Welch, of all speakers whom it has been this student's privilege to hear, most perfectly embodies the ability to understand from the inside the people he presents, and to lay forth in total sympathy his subjects' thoughts as they themselves have come to hold them. To say that Professor Welch is the writer's ideal would be embarrassing to Dr. Welch and would

overlook some other landmarks in the geography of the writer's mind; but what there is of sympathy towards the various men who appear in the present work is largely a tribute to the example of one whose empathy was great as he lectured on Prospect Street in 1960-1961.

To Dr. Lefferts A. Loetscher of Princeton Theological Seminary, and to his colleagues Dr. James Hastings Nichols, Dr. Edward A. Dowey, Dr. Norman V. Hope, Dr. Georges Augustin Barrois, Dr. Karlfried Froehlich, and Dr. John Mark Mulder, the writer is indebted as is possible only to a History Faculty who have with patience guided and encouraged his studies in their appropriate ways. Dr. Loetcher supplies to his students the detailed introduction to the leading developments and themes which are their springboard for any further advance in their understanding of the first half of the 19th Century in American Church History. In a rewarding seminar Dr. Loetscher summarized the dilemma posed to the American churches by the rise of large works of Christian benevolence --- the dilemma which, it may be fairly said, gave rise to the debate which is the subject of our present investigation.

The writer's father is still at his elbow, though gathered to his fathers, saying among other things that an education spread out over the years has its points and its pleasures, which an education taken all at once will never know about. As this study comes to a close and goes out to greet we know not whom, the writer is thankful to all who have helped make it possible; and gives especial thanks to his wife and three children, without whom, he is authorized to say, it would either never have been written at all, or else would have been written ten years ago --- but without one tenth the enjoyment.

INTRODUCTION

An age which welcomed controversy, a literate age, an age of literate, controversy-loving Presbyterians; this was the age of Robert J. Breckinridge, Thomas Smyth, Benjamin Mosby Smith, Stuart Robinson, John Calkins Coit, John Leighton Wilson, Benjamin Gildersleeve, John Bailey Adger; and of Charles Hodge; and of James Henley Thornwell. These provide a rich heritage in records which may offer us some entrance into the thoughts and hopes of the men and women who took part in its battles, even though to search out their documents, the records of their Nineteenth Century, is in fact to pay the fare for a trip to another world.

Yet however different from us they were, these men and women wrestled with fundamental problems. This study singles out one which is still very much with us: What is the best way for Christians to work together to get the Lord's work done?[1]

---

[1]That the major American denominations, the Presbyterian included, have been for some years progressively reducing the proportion of their giving earmarked for their central Board and Agency structures, out of their total giving to all causes, is seen from even a cursory review of their annual published statistics. For illustrations of other aspects of this continuing problem, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, pp xxxvi - xxxvii. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

For them this became the subject of decades of debate. Able men, and practical, and dynamic with a push to get large things accomplished, they identified, faced, and struggled with nearly every major aspect of the problem of united Christian effort. From them we have much to learn. Yet in learning we should remember that the English of these Nineteenth Century Americans contains what to us are traps. It is peppered with words like Presbyterian, Liberty, and Boards. We are quickly astray if we too easily imagine that any of these words carried in their minds the same cargo that it carries in ours.

An example may be revealing.

Most of the men we meet in these pages owned other men. Yes, Hodge too,[2] not just Thornwell.[3] Yet as we try to

[2]For a discussion of slaveowning by members of the Presbyterian Seminary faculty, see Leonard J. Trinterud, "Charles Hodge (1797-1878): Theology -- Didactic and Polemical," in Hugh T. Kerr, Editor, Sons of the Prophets [:] Leaders in Protestantism from Princeton Seminary, p 35. Compare Lefferts A. Loetscher, pp 32-33 in "New Vitality in Church and Nation," Chapter 2 in The First Presbyterian Church of Princeton: Two Centuries of History, edited by Arthur S. Link. For additional illustrative material in this connection, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr. Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, pp xxxvii - xxxviii. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[3]Benjamin Morgan Palmer remarks, on first hand observation, that Thornwell was not a very exacting taskmaster, and that it was doubtful if those who kept his small country farm going earned their keep (Life of JHT, pp 342-343).

Since to read Thornwell's defenses of slavery as a domestic institution it would be difficult to imagine

understand them, their language of ownership works against us because it survives with changed associations in the related language, also called English, which we ourselves use. Servant we are partly on guard against, because when we first found it in the King James Bible we were told that it meant slave; but slave itself is trickier, more elusive. Very few of us have anything in our direct experience to suggest automatically that slave might mean something like Professor,[4] or Wife, or Son; or Brother. Such a suggestion when we first meet it fills us with the kind of uneasiness which ranges down into disgust. But this masks from us the possibility that while a man must have something terrible in his

---

that he had personal experience in the ownership and management of slaves other than household servants, the following letter to Thornwell from his cotton broker in Charleston establishes the fact that although the scale was small and it by no means made him rich, Thornwell was raising cotton as a cash crop. At least some of his slaves were field hands:

Charleston October 23/52

Revd J. H. Thornwell
Columbia

Dear Sir

...I think we may reasonably anticipate, a reaction in [Liverpool] prices before very long, but think it would still be advisable to you to get your Cotton on Market as early as you can to take advantage of any improvement, or even to realize present prices, which are remunerative to the planter.

Very respectfully yours

Paul T. Villipigne

(Thornwell Collection, South Caroliniana Library)

[4]The reference is not to subsidiary and derivatory connotations as in "wage slave," but to literal realities, as in Greece and Rome.

heart when he makes his own brother his slave,[5] he may have the stirrings of something better in his heart when he makes his slave his wife.[6]

And then in their manuscripts what does Master mean? Master, that is, in its severest form, the master of a slave? The rock-ribbed Boston-built abolitionist-supported American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions spent two years wrestling with just that question, and its income was at stake; yet surprised and almost quizzical (like the Princeton Seminary professor who apologized publicly for discovering that there actually had been a case when failure to divide a Presbyterian Church nearly killed it, while the eventual division revived both it and its new daughter congregation),[7] the ABCFM concluded that Master in fact meant to

---

[5]The account of how E. Montague Grimké against his father Henry's will attempted to enslave his brother Francis is given in The Works of Francis James Grimké, Vol I, p viii, and retold by Clifton E. Olmstead in "Francis James Grimké (1850-1937), Christian Moralist and Civil Rights," p 162 in Hugh T[hompson] Kerr, Sons of the Prophets: Leaders in Protestantism from Princeton Seminary.

[6]As the phrase is used by Olmstead in his article on Grimké, based on Grimké's Works, Vol I, p vii, the word may be a euphemism and the reflection on Henry Grimké no credit to the South Carolinian. For further illustrative material in this connection, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, p xxxix. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[7]The circumstances leading up to the division and thereafter are given on pp 39-44 in Lefferts A. Loetscher, "The New Vitality in Church and Nation," Chapter 2 in The First Presbyterian Church of Princeton: Two Centuries of History, edited by Arthur S. Link.

one slave something approaching True Benefactor, Genuinely Worthy Idol, Best Companion, so much so that he had repeatedly refused freedom on any terms; and that to another slave, Master actually did mean True and Only Possible Protector.[8] Of course a master like that might be an unusual man; but then in every age there are unusual men. Coming from a different world from theirs, we do not automatically know how to recognize them.

These men, then, whose land and language were so like and so unlike ours, engaged for decades in a debate on how best to get God's work done. They called it a debate over Ecclesiastical Boards; by which they meant something akin to the Church Boards we do know about: they meant bodies of men

---

[8]For a general account, see Hampden C. DuBose, Memoirs of Rev. John Leighton Wilson, D. D., Missionary to Africa and Secretary of Foreign Missions, Chapter XI, "The Manumission of his Slaves," pp 97-105.

The detailed official correspondence and findings of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions are carried in the Annual Reports of that body, 1840-1844. Original correspondence between Wilson and members of his family on this and other subjects is in the John Leighton Wilson Collection, The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

Manumissions of two of Wilson's slaves, drawn in his handwriting, executed by him, and witnessed by his wife, Jane Bayard Wilson, on the Gaboon River, West Africa, are at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat North Carolina.

There is extensive coverage of this celebrated case in the New England church press of the period. The archives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and the holdings of other repositories, should make it possible to do extensive research into the relationship between the constituency of the ABCFM, its abolitionist wing, and the ABCFM's loyalty to Wilson under extreme pressure.

elected by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, with some form of administrative relationship to some benevolent enterprise of the Presbyterian Church.

A debate extending over so long a period, in such turbulent times, marked by two major disruptions to the life and work of the Presbyterian Church, is more easily followed if it can be divided into coherent periods.

Fortunately such periods do emerge. For convenience and clarity we may make the following analysis:

1. Twenty years of Old School and New School tensions, leading up to 1838, sorted Presbyterians into two main opinions on this issue of Boards:

a. The New School renounced Ecclesiastical Boards in favor of non-denominational Voluntary Societies.

b. The Old School renounced most non-denominational Voluntary Societies in favor of Ecclesiastical Boards.

2. The thirty years following 1838 sorted each school further:

a. Between 1838 and 1868 those holding the New School Presbyterian answer to the question divided into those who rejoined the Congregationalists while supporting only the Voluntary Societies, and those who returned to the Presbyterian Church and her Church Boards.

b. Between 1838 and 1862 those holding the Old School Presbyterian answer to the question debated their answer even further. They discovered that it went deeper than had been realized. They went on to make the clearest expositions yet recorded in Christian history of the theoretical and practical problems inherent in undertaking extensive Christian work; and having reached some compromises by 1860 were directed to more dramatic questions by the course and outcome of the Civil War.

Because he believes that the question of how best to conduct corporate Christian work was then and remains now important; because he finds the men of the period to be vigorous thinkers who were thorough and clear; and because he believes that we can learn something worth while from listening to what they said to each other, the writer has chosen the 19th-Century Presbyterian debate on corporate Christian work as the general area of this study.

Then, because the continued debate in the Old School stem of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, from 1838 to the beginnings of the separate existence of its Southern wing as the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America in 1861-1862, offers in manageable form the most complete exposition of the issues, he has chosen that inner period of 1839-1861 as the central focus of this study. It offers a clear-cut integrated natural section of the debate as a whole, marked at its beginning by the great Presbyterian division of 1837-1838, and marked at its end by the great national disruption of 1861-1865.

Although a summary of developments before 1837-1838 will be necessary for placing the period of our concentration into perspective, that earlier period is excluded from our main focus for three reasons.

First, the spectrum of debates between Old School and New School was enormously more complicated. They were not limited to the one topic of method in Christian benevolent work, and the various topics were so entertwined and inter-related that the issues involved in our topic do not emerge so clearly then as they do in the period following the

division.[9]

Second, previous studies have largely emphasized the earlier period, or have emphasized other issues, leaving our period of 1839-1861 and our issue relatively untouched.[10]

---

[9]This was a controversial age. Its Presbyterian children still felt psychologically close to the Reformation, in which controversy on behalf of truth was a sacred duty. It should not be imagined that the controversy on the administration of missions was the only or even the most important controversy of these decades in the eyes of its participants. With the exception of the Elder question, however, there was little interaction with the Board question, and none on the scale of the interlocked issues leading up to the disruption between New and Old Schools.

[10]Kenneth Paul Berg in his dissertation Charles A. Hodge, Controversialist, State University of Iowa, 1952, finds the Boards controversy too minimal in Hodge's over-all coverage to go into.

Donald Nelson Bowdle in his dissertation Evangelism and Ecumenism in Nineteenth Century America: A Study in the Life and Literature of Samuel Irenaeus Prime, 1812-1885, UTS Va., 1970, gets into aspects of the Old School-New School disagreements but is not primarily concerned with Old School developments in our area.

Thomas Erskine Clark in his dissertation Thomas Smyth: Moderate of the Old South, UTS Va., 1970, deals with Smyth's opposition to Thornwell on Boards in the Synod of South Carolina, and in the pages of the Baltimore church press, but Smyth's fascinating personality and great career as a controversalist over much wider areas properly deter Clarke from going into our area of inquiry except as it involves Smyth directly.

John Jey Deifell, Jr., in his dissertation The Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge, Edinburgh, 1969, misses (as Hodge missed) the crucial connection between the Board question and the question of the shape of the church which embraces Boards, and in general is limited by an outlook which has been summarized by the statement that the Deifell thesis is that it is too bad Hodge was not smart enough to be neo-orthodox.

Professor Paul Leslie Garber's dissertation, The

Third, the parties, personalities, issues, and institutions involved in the Old School - New School conflict were so many, so complex, so prolific, as to call for a number of

---

Religious Thought of James Henley Thornwell, Duke University, 1939, is helpful but is concerned with wider sweeps and philosophical backgrounds. It touches our topic only incidentally.

Cooper C. Kirk's dissertation, A History of the Southern Presbyterian Church in Florida: 1821-1891, Florida State University, 1966, traces some of Thornwell's Florida influences and legacy but naturally moves quickly on to the main body of Florida history.

Earl Ronald MacCormac's dissertation, The Transition from Voluntary Missionary Society to the Church as Missionary Organization Among the American Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Methodists, Yale University, 1960, traces the involvement of those bodies in non-denominational cooperative volunteer benevolent societies, and their transition to a pattern of denominational work conducted by ecclesiastical Boards. His work is especially helpful in sorting out the complex relationships between the voluntary societies and the Presbyterian structures of the undivided church and, after the disruption, to the Old and New School Presbyterian structures alike. MacCormac also offers needed perspective by showing a more general background.

Edgar Caldwell Mayse, in his dissertation, Robert Jefferson Breckinridge: American Presbyterian Controversialist, UTS Va., 1974, shows Breckinridge's involvement with Thornwell, Smyth, and the Board Controversy in the perspective of the shifting attentions of the most colorful figure of the day. Mayse like Clarke is particularly acute in analysis of the effect of the march of history on his protagonist. Where Clarke shows Smyth as a moderate in an age of extremes, Mayse shows Breckinridge as an extremist who, having won his supreme victory, lives on to find that the world he has made is not for him a very happy place.

Edmund Arthur Moore in his dissertation, The Earlier Life of Robert J. Breckinridge, 1800-1845, University of Chicago, 1932, barely reaches our period within the limits he chooses, and is focussed on other matters.

John Oliver Nelson in his dissertation, The Rise

dissertation-level studies for their adequate treatment.[11]

For rather different reasons we exclude the period after 1862 from our main focus.

First, the great climax of the debate on Ecclesiastical Boards at the Presbyterian General Assembly held in Rochester, New York, in 1860, effectively settled the matter permanently in the Northern wing of the Old School.[12]

---

of the Princeton Theology: A Genetic Study of American Presbyterianism Until 1850, Yale University, 1936, delights all his readers as he carries out his own dictum, that there is no reason for a dissertation to make dull reading; his study is as fresh and engaging as it was in 1936. For our purposes its interests are more theological than ecclesiastical.

Penrose St. Amant's dissertation, The Rise and Early Development of the Princeton School of Theology Edinburgh, 1952, approaches the same general area from a later perspective but with acute limitations from the standpoint of a study of the Board controversy.

While scattered articles enlarge on points made in one or another of these dissertations, or deal in other aspects of the figures who take part in our debate, none has been addressed to this period or to this subject.

[11]For the best compact discussion of the complexities and crosscurrrents of that conflict, see pages 25-36 of Leonard J. Trinterud in "Charles Hodge (1797-1878)[:] Theology -- Didactic and Polemical," in Hugh T[hompson] Kerr, Sons of the Prophets: Leaders in Protestantism from Princeton Seminary.

Professor Trinterud has remarked in conversation that until much more work has been done in the abundant manuscript sources, starting with such collections as the 6,000 carefully preserved papers, mostly letters to and from Hodge, at the Princeton University Library, it is treacherous to rely on the much more limited (though numerous) printed materials of the times.

[12]From the time of the vote on the previous question at the General Assembly of 1860 until the present, there has been intermittent dissatisfaction with the perfor-

Second, the organizing General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, held in Augusta, Georgia, in 1861, effectively settled the matter for the Southern wing of the Old School.[13]

Third, with the onset, conduct and aftermath of the Civil War, the minds of Presbyterians were drawn to pungent new questions: in the north to reunion between Old and New School;[14] in the south to the survival of the church in the wreck of a civilization;[15] in the border areas of Kentucky and Missouri to the question of the Civil Magistrate, which had been postponed for those Synods during the war itself.[16]

. . . . . .

---

mance of the Boards of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, but no radical criticism of the concept underlying them. For illustrative material, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, p xxvii. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[13]The statement in the text may not be entirely complete. The form of Southern Presbyterian mission administration was fixed in 1861, but the dislocations of war and the long-term pull of administrative logic in turn had major effects on its content.

[14]Compare the involvement of Hodge in attempts to block reunion.

[15]Compare here the absorption of John Leighton Wilson in sustentation work at the close of the war, and the change of the actual name of the Board of Domestic Missions to the Board of Sustentation.

[16]As we shall see, the pugnacious energies of Stuart Robinson were available to oppose ecclesiastical boards for several years before 1860.

At the close of the war he devoted himself body and soul to the issues arising out of the position of the PCUSA General Assembly on the civil magistrate and the sin of treason, and to a concept of the doctrine of the

And fourth, the central figure in these debates of 1840-1860, the great persistent public protagonist of the proposition that Ecclesiastical Boards are both theoretically and practically a serious mistake, the man who kept the issue alive and incisive, James Henley Thornwell, died in 1862 at the age of 49. With his death the debate fell silent.

As we follow the trail through the sources, it becomes clear that one of the men who joined forces with Thornwell, John Calkins Coit, emerges from the record as more profound, more radical, perhaps more realistic and certainly more challenging than any of those, Thornwell and Hodge included, whose names are today attached to the scholarly conceptions and popular memory of the debate.

The recovery of Coit's experience in the debate, and of the ideas he contributed to it, has been one of many pleasures in this project.

Yet in the received image of the debate, it was Jacobus Contra Mundum.[17] Would this be to overdo it?

It is true that few would be tempted to say that Thornwell's chosen ground was so crucial or so high as the ground Athanasius defended. The Nature of the Church is high ground

---

spirituality of the church that is coming to be suspected as the real source of that doctrine in the form popular in the Presbyterian Church in the United States in later decades.

[17] As professor, and later president, it was Thornwell's duty to sign each South Carolina College diploma in Latin. He chose the form Jacobus H. Thornwell. (See Thornwell Signature Practice MSS in the Thornwell Collection at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.)

indeed, but surely never so high as the Nature of Jesus Christ. Yet Athanasius and Thornwell are alike in this: They both were given commanding gifts of character and intellect. They both worked out their positions with clarity. They both chose issues which were important and whose importance looms larger with the passage of time.

And against overpowering opposition they both held their ground with courage, resourcefulness and tenacity.

PROLOGUE

THE MIND AND THE CLASSIC

In the fall of 1840 one of the brightest young men North America has ever seen sat down to read the October number of Robert Jefferson Breckinridge's Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine.

The brilliance of a man's mind may be as difficult to measure at the distance of 135 years as it is to measure any mind in any of the mind's dimensions at any distance -- even minds so close to us as our own. But it seems beyond question that this young man's mind was as intense and powerful as any that has yet appeared within the bounds of the United States. The genius which set him apart as a boy did not fade. Under the discipline of sound teachers, and under his own prodigious self-discipline which fully matched the enormous capacities of the intellect which had been lent him for a season to tame and harness, his genius took on the responsibilities of a man.

The bright young man reading through Breckinridge's monthly Presbyterian journal was at that moment just on the verge of writing a classic.

His name was James Henley Thornwell.

For him the October pages from Baltimore were not what

we see, foxed crinkling heirlooms surviving in a handful of the great archival libraries of the world. For him they were battle cries from his revolutionary leader, seed thoughts from the energetic Kentucky lawyer-preacher who when barely thirty-seven had galvanized half a denomination into united action, written the manifestoes of the reform party, organized and delivered the votes (Thornwell's among them) which had separated the warm from the lukewarm in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America just three years before, at its revolutionary reforming General Assembly of 1837.

As Thornwell turned the leaves they were fresh and white, the ink crisp as only the bigger-city printers could make it. The ideas they carried were likewise fresh and crisp, black against white like the pages which embodied them and which carried them across time and space from the mind of Breckinridge to the kindred spirits who admired him and looked up to him, stirred each in its own measure at the challenge of having a part with him to play in keeping their great church alive, dynamic, useful in a century of dazzling change.

If the mind applying itself to Breckinridge's magazine was brilliant, what was the shape of that mind?

Its intellectual shape we have all heard of, though few of us today know that once common pattern save by hearsay. The training which his sound schoolmasters and professors gave him, and which he continued to give himself with all the energies of a disciplined scholar who knows what he wants and where to find it, was as classical as his mind was brilliant. The whole range of the literary and philosophical heritage of the Western world was his, at first hand from the originals, available in many cases complete and entire from

memory.

But this mind of his was far from being a mere storage bank. That he could remember material by the acre and call it up fresh and sparkling at will was true, but this is in fact a facility common to most men. (Those who have their share of it in a form tilted towards the literary often gravitate to academic niches and are grateful for it as a professional asset, forgetting that an evening by the fire-side listening to the complete life history of every horse ever owned on that side of the mountain, unreeled by men who cannot write or read, should tame much pride as well as tell us what school gave us Homer.) No, he had trained his memory to serve him superbly, but the true temper and training of his mind itself were aimed at the analytic.

James Henley Thornwell's mind was not made to linger in rest, brooding, in contemplation of knowledge. It was made to probe, to dissect, to analyze, to construct and reconstruct, searching deeper and yet deeper, further back and yet further to the foundations and the beginnings; and all in an instant. As the computer / calculator on the desk in micro-seconds brings up the instant answer to $45,679.24 over 7, times 12, so Thornwell's mind regularly and instantly isolated the parts of all it touched, took them back to their origins and beginnings, and brought them down to a present, useful form. Displayed on the orderly balance sheet of his summaries, they gave Thornwell, and to anyone else interested enough to look or listen, the intellectual and moral equivalent of a well-designed monthly financial summary sheet's ordered presentation of reality.[1]

---

[1]Subject, of course, to GIGO, the one ineluctable law of the computer. The best of minds, like the best of calculators, will have difficulty rising above the quality of its data input.

There was one important difference between what Thornwell did, and what a financial statement does. Somewhere along the line the brilliant, clear instantaneous analytical faculty of his mind had been wed to an emotional and poetic faculty which took the raw materials of the output of analysis and made them attractive by virtue of the powers of poet and seer. Thornwell's powers of memory and analysis were in submission and service to his calling as evangelist and prophet, two of the major components of his responsibility as a minister of the gospel. And unlike the computer and calculator, which analyze and manipulate and report on blind command, Thornwell was vitally and personally interested in truth. He wanted to see the figures balance, but even more he wanted the figures to be in real and significant relationship to what is Out There, to reality.

Every testimony and every evidence we have, direct and indirect, testifies to these three controlling features in the underlying geology of Thornwell's mind: it was a mind of high genius capable of and disciplined to enormous feats of absorption, retention and recall; it was a mind of high genius capable of and disciplined to a constant habit of analysis and reconstruction; and it was a mind of high genius vitally concerned with truth: with the knowledge, statement and exhibition of objective reality.

To understand what went on in Thornwell's mind as he looked over the October, 1840, issue of The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, we need also to sense something of the assumptions and conclusions of the Christian community of which he was such a bright and rising light. To what extent Thornwell had absorbed these assumptions and conclusions blindly and unconsciously, and to what extent he had adopted them after consciously studying them and weighing them; and

to what extent he had made them his own after independent investigations and reflections which led him to positions which he later found expressed in the Christian community which by conscious intention he chose as his own, would make fascinating work for a biographer, but is beyond our purpose here. What we do need to know is their main outline.

Robert J. Breckinridge, Benjamin Mosby Smith, John Calkins Coit, Stuart Robinson, James Henly Thornwell, and their contemporaries in the reform-oriented wing of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in the years between 1831 and 1861, shared a common intellectual, spiritual, emotional and religious form of Christianity. Pervasive, compelling, it was the background of all they thought and did. It was a living part of all they undertook, of all they produced. Mediated to us in their different personalities, interests, circumstances, opportunities, and individual reactions, this underlying 19th Century Old School Presbyterian Reform Christianity is as important to our understanding of their thought and program as an understanding of the common Elizabethan framework of sin, prayer, confession, salvation, damnation, and demonology is to an understanding of the first thing about Hamlet -- that Hamlet could not take his father's apparition at face value and proceed immediately to revenge on his uncle (demons conterfeit the good with deception, a fact of life which Macbeth ignored but Hamlet respected); that Hamlet could not kill his uncle while his uncle was at prayer (it would send his uncle straight to heaven).

We may analyze the common Christian mind of the Old School Presbyterian Reformers as follows.

First, in contrast to ours, they were acutely and con-

tinually aware of the apostasy of Rome.

They maintained a lively consciousness of the facts of life of the year 1500, and of the fact that far from retreating from her positions set forth thereafter in the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church had steadily reaffirmed them.

The Reformers of 1831-1861 agreed in full with the view of the Reformers of the First Reformation: that the apostasy of Rome involved a complete perversion of the Gospel, a complete perversion of the Church, and a fundamental perversion of the Christian life.

1. The New Testament gospel of salvation by grace through faith had been replaced in Rome by a system of salvation by works, for sale at that.

2. The simple New Testament patterns of the Church had been replaced in Rome by a hierarchy of prelates, by a network of a worldly dominion, by engines of administration, and by a blasphemous false worship.

3. The New Testament Christian life had been transformed at Rome into a thing of two levels, one for the "religious" and one for the masses; into a mockery of blind acceptance, with practical license to do evil, and completely separated from its root, which is that individual grounding in Scripture which alone gives the believer an objective frame of reference through which the Holy Spirit can best apply the mind of God to the mind of his servant.

Second, somewhat like ours but much more strongly, touching the government of the Church the Old School Reformers of 1831-1861 were convinced that the original Reformers were right to abandon prelacy, the line-of-command authority

of one man over another in the church. They agreed also that the reaction of the Independents (to form a collection of independent local churches, whatever their internal government) and the Congregationalists (Independents whose basic internal government was by the congregation as a whole) was not towards the New Testament pattern which is the right alternative to prelacy.

As they read the New Testament with Calvin and Westminster, they noted the rule of the church by presbyters, united by councils to which differences could be and were appealed. They noted also with Calvin and Westminster the two kinds of presbyter in Scripture, those who like the apostles devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word, and who like the apostles ruled; and those who like the apostles ruled but like Paul supported themselves by a secular occupation. They noted too the Deacon, whose office was created in order to allow the apostles, and later the preaching presbyters, to devote themselves entirely to a spiritual ministry.

So with the Reformation they agreed in shunning the perversions of Rome.

Third, from Calvin they received, and heartily endorsed, a commanding sense of the importance of clear, integrated, rational systematization of their thought. So far as possible the Christian thinker should be no wishy-washy equivocater, no collector of loose ends, no muddler. Most particularly the Christian should be a man of fixed principles, his basis for both thought and action.

Fourth, they did not agree with the notion that the developments of Reformed faith and life in the first century and a quarter following Calvin represented deterioration,

some degenerated declined version of a once noble faith and life. On the contrary they were keenly alive to the ongoing struggle during that period, against Roman Catholicism in its vigorous, protracted attempts to reconquer all its lost European ground. The anvil on which Dutch, English and Scottish reformers hammered out their faith and practice, and on which they themselves were hammered out, in these men's eyes was the anvil of God purifying and moulding his chosen. Main-line Presbyterian ears in the 1970s may hear the words "Westminster Standards" with little enthusiasm. The pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Dallas who told his guest some years ago, a visiting schoolmate from Eastern parts, that the sooner the Presbyterian church could get shut of this antiquated and outmoded Westminster relic the better, was living in a world further removed from Breckinridge, Coit and Thornwell than Jane Bayard Wilson's Gaboon River world was removed from her girlhood world of the Savannah and the Schuylkill; but the Dallas pastor's thoughts of Westminster were warm happy welcome compared to the repugnance often expressed in American Presbyterian circles in the 1970s for so scholastic an effort as the Canons of the Synod of Dort. Not so the Old School Reformers. They were not in daily contact with the Dutch Reformed tradition and community, but they thought well of them. <u>They viewed the decades between the Institutes and Westminster as a time of hammering great concepts into compact, even more powerful form, tested by the fires of opposition and knit together by the best minds of the West</u>.

Fifth, to the Old School Reformers, the Puritans lived under no iron cloak of prudishness, and needed no rehabilitation at the hands of a Harvard professor from the Midwest. Modern reviewers of Thornwell have been known to imply that his quotations from John Owen show a narrow, constraining

cast to his mind. Nothing could be further from the effect the Old School reformers perceive in that Puritan divine. For them it was Roman Catholic willingness to do anything not forbidden in Scripture which had led the whole western Christian world into her captivity to a magic ritual in the place of the worship of God by alert sons, into her captivity to superstition and pageantry in the place of the Lord's supper, into an earthbound kingdom of estates, revenues and titles in the place of an apostolic ministry of prayer and preaching, into a despotic government by officials ranged in hierarchy in the place of the fellowship of the apostles in the bonds of the Synod at Jerusalem. The Old School reformers saw Owen's insistence that the Church is forbidden to do anything not commanded in scripture -- commanded being a word taken in the broad and rigorous sense illustrated by the Puritan treatment of the Ten Commandments in the Westminster Larger Catechism -- as liberating, not confining. The Puritan view of the Commandments of Scripture, as they saw it, liberated the Church from captivity to ten thousand possible corruptions, of which the fertile minds of every age would never fail to have an inexhaustible supply.

As the Old School Reformers of the 1840s saw it, the Reformation had freed the Church; their heirs down to Westminster had fought to maintain and secure that freedom. They insisted that the original reformers were altogether right in identifying Scripture as the Church's only protection from corruption in worship, doctrine, government and morals. To dismiss the men of Westminster and Dort, and to dismiss Puritans as it is popular to dismiss them in many Presbyterian circles of the 1970s, would strike the Old School Reformers of the 1840s as being a piece of outrageous perversity. In our terms it would be perversity on a par with naming Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe as securers of liberty for

the nation, and then marking down Lincoln and the Republican party of the 1860s as narrow scholastics who degraded the achievements of the founding fathers by introducing rigidity into the system with those wretched, binding amendments to the Constitution.

Sixth, in a parallel attitude, the Old School Reformers viewed the written constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America as a limitation on abuse and license, rather than a limitation on freedom. The written constitution of the church, like the written constitution of the nation, ensured constitutional government as over against a government of raw power or mere expediency.

Seventh, Scot and Puritan both had drunk deep of the Genevan waters. Looking to Scot and Puritan and Geneva, the Old School Presbyterian Reformers had received a pervasive psychological feel of Christianity as an essential full-time preoccupation. Pastors, Elders and people alike would be expected to have their minds first of all on the Kingdom of God, on Jesus Christ and his righteousness, on God and his plan, promises, providence, punishments, mercy, covenants, eternal judgment.

This is the atmosphere in which you expect to be out to church on Sunday with all your family; in which a sermon of an hour or more is a normal part of a considerably longer worship service. It is an atmosphere in which you expect to be in church again that evening, and possibly in between times in the afternoon as well. This is an atmosphere which makes the Lord's Day a day freed up from the week's necessities, so that you and your house when not at worship can have the time to be storing up the Scriptures and the Catechisms in your hearts. Calvin and Puritan and Scot and their heirs in the Old School Presbyterian Church took Christianity

as a serious matter. It would bring joy, satisfaction and delight; but you kept your mind on it, you put your time and heart into it.

Eighth, to this groundwork of Reformation and Puritan attitudes had been added the revival spirit. No understanding of these men is possible apart from this. They are steeped in it. Their colleague at the North, Charles Hodge, shared it, as did many throughout the entire Presbyterian church as a whole. With Hodge the effects of revival might be third-generation; but they were pervasive, making him remembered by his students overwhelmingly not for his theology but for his warm, sometimes burning, outpourings in the Sunday afternoon Conferences. With Hodge the fire may have burned so long and so mellow that with his death a generation later Princeton would have moved irrevocably toward the merely academic forms of Christianity; but Hodge was converted in a profound though quiet revival on the College of New Jersey campus; Breckinridge was called to the ministry through a camp meeting held on his own property; Thornwell was converted, as most of his fellow ministers were, at one or another series of intensive preaching services aimed straight at the unrepentent of whatever age or circumstance.

Revival is, for the Old School Presbyterian Reformers, the hope and thanksgiving of their prayers, the ongoing given of their expectations, the underlying assumption which puts meaning and immediate reality into their concepts of sin, salvation, repentance, conversion, damnation, responsibility to take the good news to the lost. It absolutely pervades their outlook and expression both public and private. Just as they cannot be understood without understanding their view of the Roman Catholic Church, of the Reformation, of the Reformation consolidations at Westminster, of the serious

Puritan effort to think and live by the Word of God, they cannot possibly be understood apart from their participation in the American atmosphere which was created by and developed from the Great Awakening and the recurrent revivals which followed.

From this atmosphere they breathed in their conviction, reinforced by first-hand exposure to the Bible, that it lay on all Christians, and on ministers especially, to preach the gospel to every creature, teaching them to obey all that the Lord had commanded.

Here then is James Henley Thornwell, with a mind sharp as a razor; sharing this particular kind of Christianity; and with a subject simmering along on the back burner. The subject that has attracted his attention is clear enough: it is the problem of the administration of missions in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America -- The Boards of the Presbyterian Church.

Breckinridge had listed those Boards. In the one hundred thirty-five years since then, they have grown to giant size, handling millions of dollars a year and employing a small army of staff at home and abroad. In our day we find the Boards strong, large, prestigious. They seem to be as sure and certain and inevitable a part of our landscape as the all-surrounding ocean.

The Boards, of course, though smaller then, were there before Thornwell. As our curtain rises on the young man in South Carolina with his crisp new copy of the Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, we may briefly analyze their earlier history to see how they came to be what they were in 1840.

BACKGROUND

THE SETTING: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN CHURCHES

Christians of many kinds and nations emigrated to the British Colonies in America. By 1789, all thoughts of National establishment blasted, they were on their own, to be self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting.

Distance from homeland authority, common environmental influences, and shared experiences of decline and Awakening, united with growing national consciousness to act as a solvent on denominational distinctives.

As Revival kindled personal and corporate Christian awareness and concern, burgeoning non-denominational ad-hoc voluntary societies undertook large evangelical benevolent programs to evangelize, church and reform the United States and the world in their perishing millions.

Several things were combining at this point. Cut off from political backing which would make every newborn child an automatic member of their church, forced to rely on nothing but the contributions of their own people, more sensitively awake than ever to deplorable situations around them near and far, filled with a warm, enthusiastic spirit, and placed on a catch-as-catch-can sink-or-swim basis as one church in a field of several -- usually locally as well as

nationally -- the churches had every incentive to act. They also had a clear handwriting on the wall: if they did not act, either the country would sink down into an abyss of paganism, or other churches would do the job and their own churches would die on the vine.

Two additional matters should be noted here.

The first of these is a pattern of churchly resurgence in many of the denominations during the first half of the 19th Century. As enunciated by Dr. Lefferts A. Loetscher,[1] many of the American churches were loosened from strict adherence to their denominational patterns by their distance from their homeland churches, and by various difficult or new situations in the new land. When in time the wide sweep of the awakenings and the revivals touched them, there was a further loosening of the old distinctive patterns of church life and thought. Leaders in a number of the denominations became concerned at the loss of what they saw as the valuable special contributions of their communion, and took steps to recapture or revive the older, more distinctive denominational approaches and requirements. In the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, our particular interest, this reemphasis on Presbyterian values took the form of renewed attention to the theology of the Westminster Standards and to the system of church government set forth in the Presbyterian Book of Church Order.[2]

[1] Lefferts A. Loetcher, The Broadening Church, pp 1 - 6.

[2] The emphasis on these by the Old School in its attack on the New, and the insistence of the New School that neither were of such great importance, were major features of the struggle leading up to the disruption of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1837-1838. See below, pp 28-32.

Here a difference in language of the sort noted above[3] can prove misleading. In present-day English the phrase High Church brings with it liturgical overtones. We should remind ourselves, each time we see the phrase in Presbyterian contexts of the first half of the 19th Century, that most Presbyterians of that era abhorred even the thought of robe. A Presbyterian minister of that day like Robert J. Breckinridge, identified as the father of what his opponents called the "High Church" party, agreed to fill the pulpit as guest preacher in his brother's church only on condition that the new organ there be kept silent throughout the entire service from beginning to end. What the words meant in their language was simply what we would call a strong denominational emphasis or, in some contexts, high claims for the authority or power of the central denominational organization. And by 1860 Charles Hodge would be using the phrase High Church to condemn what he described as an effort to place an undue limitation on the powers of the General Assembly.[4]

The second is the relatively small size of numbers, measured by late 20th-Century notions of importance. Congregations,[5] Presbyteries,[6] Synods[7] and denominations were

---

[3] Pp xxxii ff. [4] See below, pp 528-529.

[5] In 1849, on the eve of the California Gold Rush, the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans was the third largest church of any denomination in the nation. Its membership was 754.

[6] The minimum number required for a quorum, three ministers and one ruling elder, or (under debated General Assembly rulings) four ministers, was not always greatly below the actual number of ministers and elders available in some Presbyteries under frontier or schismatic conditions.

[7] See below, pp 105-106, for a concrete illustration in the form of the complete roll of those present for a regular annual meeting of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, which took in much territory in addition to what is now within the bounds of those two states.

used to associations in far smaller numbers[8] than the minds of church leaders today believe sufficient for mere survival, let alone effective ministry.[9]

The background to our period opens, therefore, amidst the effects of the emergence, renewal, and new awareness of the American churches as they made their way from the early days of the colonial settlements into the early decades of the Republic. To these must be added one more essential feature of the churches' developing character as the Nineteenth Century went into its second and third decades: an urgent sense of moral and political doom for American society if nothing were done about saving it from paganism. This sense of impending disaster grew out of one firm conviction and two items of knowledge. The conviction was that men and women who are not Christian are not only lost in the next world, they make bad neighbors and worse citizens in this one. The items of knowledge were, first, that the western population, devoid of pastors, evangelists, Sunday Schools, Bibles, churches and Christian reading matter, was rapidly being lost to the Christian church; and second, that the western population was expanding by leaps and bounds and would, soon by the weight of its votes rule the nation.

"These new states and territories are sure to rule us," Dr. William Swan Plumer said in an address delivered before

---

[8] What by some are now considered to be insignificant splinter groups have memberships equalling that of the entire Presbyterian church in the United States of America at various points between 1789 and 1860.

[9] Two Presbyteries were in 1972 united with a third Presbytery of which the writer was a member, on the grounds that none was large enough "to be effective in mission." Each of the three was larger than the entire Synod of South Carolina and Georgia was in 1840.

the Anniversary Meeting of the American Tract Society in 1850, he who alone was ever twice Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

> These new states and territories are sure to rule us. This last winter in some cabin, perhaps in Minnesota, might be seen studying by the light of his pine torch, a boy who is yet to be President of these United States.
>
> These new countries, whose whole character is yet to be developed, are to rule us. With their vast dimensions, inexhaustible resources, bold independence of character, and the corrupt influences among them, it behooves us to bestir ourselves.[26]

Dr. Plumer had his state wrong. He missed his decade. But on the matter that counted, he knew. No man who has stood in the somber shadows of the Lincoln Memorial and read there on its walls the words of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural has ever been in doubt as to where the man whom Plumer foresaw, the man who stands at the heart and center of American history and spirit, got his fundamental ideas as well as the expression of them. But Abraham Lincoln's Bible, the Bible in reach of Abraham Lincoln on the frontier, was put there by the urgent conviction of the awakened Christian community that unless they took the gospel to the west, the nation was lost.

We see, then, that the American churches in the early years of the Nineteenth Century already possessed an honorable and substantial history. They had acclimatized themselves to their new environments. Threatened by hostile natives, they had survived and had begun a work of Indian evangelization and education in contrast to the usual

---

[10] Annual Report of the American Tract Society, XXV 1850, p 9. Paragraphing added.

hostile responses of most Europeans to Indian matters. Threatened by unfriendly governmental authorities backing unfriendly ecclesiastical establishments, they had survived and secured an equal footing for all churches.

Threatened by internal coldness and death, they had come into seasons of great refreshing. Surrounded by a new, complex and rapidly changing society, flung over vast reaches of continental space, they had analyzed their basic problem and recognized their basic alternatives. Surrounded by a world of dead and dying men and women, they had been rekindled in their hearts to carry the good news of salvation to all. Finally, placed in a vast territory governed by rulers elected by the people, they saw clearly that unless the people were to become Christian, the rulers soon would not be.

They had every reason to try to do all in their power to bring Christ and his church to this people, and this people into Christ and his church.

In doing so, they developed a new structure: The Voluntary Society, and its ecclessiastical counterpart, the denominational Mission Board.

What were they? The voluntary benevolent society was a structure dedicated to the accomplishment of a stated particular purpose, based on a network of local and regional societies affiliated with it. It was a national structure, collecting large funds to carry on large operations following a common administrative pattern in wide relationships to the churches and to other benevolent societies.

The typical organizational pattern of these societies included a wide membership; a large Board of Managers elected at traditional annual Anniversary meetings; a small Executive Committee who were the actual governing body; a full-time executive with the title of Secretary; and one or more fund-raising Agents who toured the constituent churches and local societies for the purpose of promotion and receiving free-will offerings made in special collections at each speaking or preaching engagement.

Significantly, the typical organizational pattern for a Presbyterian ecclesiastical Board was closely parallel to the above: a large Board of Directors elected at the General Assembly; a small Executive Committee who were the actual governing body; a full-time executive with the title of Secretary; and one or more fund-raising Agents who toured the constituent churches and local societies for the purpose of promotion and receiving free-will offerings made in special collections at each speaking or preaching engagement.

We should note finally at this point that in the American churches of the period the principal system for raising any money not collected in pew rents or subscriptions towards the costs of building upkeep and the support of the pastor, was the special offering.

THE DILEMMA POSED TO THE AMERICAN CHURCHES BY THE RISE OF CORPORATE CHRISTIAN BENEVOLENCE

Surveying the scene we have just reviewed, Dr. Lefferts A. Loetscher of Princeton Theological Seminary has suggested that the rise of the successful new forms of corporate Christian work in the first thirty years of the 19th Century posed a serious dilemma to the American churches.[1]

This was the first horn: If the enormously popular burgeoning benevolent works of Christian evangelism and mercy remained outside the denominational structures, the center of gravity of American Christian life would inexorably shift outside the denominational envelopes. This would leave to the denominations the limited spheres of conducting worship services, enforcing discipline from a position of inaction, and regulating formal theology. In time all the live, spiritual, dynamic relevant Christianity would be somewhere else. The churches would be left with the desiccated remains of their traditional heritage.

This was the second horn: If the denominations took up the burgeoning benevolent works themselves into their own ecclesiastical structures, the effect would be inexorably to transform the churches into something quite different from

---

[1]See above, pp 13-19.

what they had been or ever expected to be.

The analytic Princeton professor of the 19th Century, Charles Hodge, as he faced, from within the orderly circle of received Presbyterian church government, the heady enthusiasms and battering self-assurances of the great independent benevolent agencies at the peak of their power and prosperity,[2] detected in the heat of battle something of what the analytic Princeton professor of the 20th Century would detect as he looked out his window in unhurried calm at the battlefields of an earlier day. Without question he saw and faced up to the implications of leaving Presbyterians to an independent-Society benevolence, of embracing only an independent-Board obedience to the commands of the Gospel.

But will we find an equal perspicacity in that other analytic Presbyterian, the South Carolina professor whose open good sense mixed with courage in proportions able to stop a drunken riot in its tracks? I believe that we will. As we retrace the lines of Dr. Thornwell's thinking, clear and haunting on the winds of life remembered, we shall see that nothing seemed plainer to him than that if the Presbyterian church took the great new modern efforts of Christian hope and love within her own bounds, she could not survive in recognizable form unless from the very outset she enforced the most stringent measures to mold and adapt the new benevolent activity to the shape of existing Presbyterian polity.

The Great Awakening, it has been said, and fervid revivalism, acted as solvents on the old established struc-

---

[2]See below, pp 462-463.

tures of church and theology in emerging America.[3] And it has been remarked that the Evangelical Enterprise with its powerful Boards, towering engines of light aimed at darkness, not only acted as a solvent which further softened the original outlines of the American churches, it also acted as a mold, re-shaping all the churches to a new and more uniform pattern of life.[4] If these are valid insights, and if the benevolent impulse was in measure the outgrowth of awakening and revival, how great then has been the eventual impact of the first great Awakening as its consequences have unfolded through the years!

---

[3] In its most common form, this view says that the appeal, made by the evangelist to the free will of the sinner, constituted a de facto modification of the insistence of Calvinism on the double decrees of the will of God, who immutably foreordains some to damnation and some to salvation; which in turn required a modification to the theory if evangelization were to be justified.

At the same time, this view sees the emphasis which all awakened and revivalistic communions make on the themes and methods of awakening, revival, and the following marks of the renewed Christian life, as drawing all participating denominations into a common bond of shared emphases which tend to obscure earlier differences in theology, church government, and patterns of worship.

[4] For what the writer believes to be the classic statement of the practical effect of the general adoption of the Board system on the American denominations embracing it, see below, p 226, Note 46.

THE PRESBYTERIAN DIVISION OF 1837-1838

We are now ready to look more particularly at the views expressed by Old- and New-School Presbyterians in the United States of the 19th Century in the debate which led up to their great disruption in 1837-1838.[1]

In that year these two temperaments of Presbyterians, the Old School and the New, split apart dramatically. They represented long-standing tensions which were neither temporary nor shallow within Presbyterian life and thought. By 1826 the General Assembly had begun to be the scene of sharp debates and sharp political maneuvering between these schools; by 1830 every General Assembly was become the scene of impassioned partisan language which succeeding years failed

---

[1] Russell E. Hall in "An Outline History of the Presbyterian Church in America," Journ Presby Hist Soc XXVI 4 p 246, is correct in saying that historians are mistaken and confusing who treat the divided Assembly between 1838 and 1869 as one unit. Chief Justice Gibson, in rendering the opinion of the Supreme Court of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Eastern District, May 8, 1839, as printed in Samuel Miller, Jr.,'s Report of the Presbyterian Church Case, pp 587-593, makes it clear why it is correct, as Hall suggests (p 246), that the Old School branch was "the successor of the undivided church and the New School branch...a distinct and separate body."

to temper;[2] by 1835 the two great blocs were found nearly evenly matched,[3] the majority at any given General Assembly taking whatever action it could to improve its position;[4] and by 1837 when by general agreement both sides had come to feel that division was desirable and inevitable,[5] failure to reach agreement on the terms of disagreement was followed by

---

[2]Compare Sam[ue]l Miller in Princeton to Francis McFarland in Greenville, Augusta County, Virginia, March 14, 1835, "Alas! that we should be every day expending that strength in fighting with one another...!" MSS, ALS. In the Francis McFarland Collection at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

Compare also Ashbel Green on a Nominating Committee Report: "It was the report of this committee which led to those scenes of disorder and confusion which disgraced the assembly, and grieved every friend to religion and the Presbyterian Church. The report was so flagrantly and intolerably at war with all equity and propriety, that it produced criminations and recriminations, which issued in a complete disregard to the Moderator and of all order; and rendered a hasty recess, the only expedient left, to bring the members into a temper that would admit of their proceeding in business." (Beman, An Appeal to the Presbyterian Church, p 13.)

[3]The tallies on all interesting questions from this Assembly onwards are seldom other than close. It was this which drove the losers in any given year nearly to distraction, and which eventually led the Old School adherents to dissolve the Synods, and therefore the votes, of the most unanimously New School area of the Church.

[4]When, in the Pittsburgh Assembly of 1836, the Old School had elected the Moderator and proceeded, as it thought, to the settlement of the year's business on a basis satisfactory to itself, a steamboat from down the Ohio docked and unloaded a deckful of tardy Commissioners from the western regions. The New School by this fresh access of commissioners took over the majority and proceeded to undo what had been inaugurated.

[5]See Drs. Beman, Peters, and others, "New School Committee on the State of the Church," 1837, as quoted in F. T. Brown, A Sermon etc., p 25.

sharp and devastating majority action for division on its own terms.[6] "Peace and harmony" were gone from "our agitated, bleeding Zion."[7] In place of sweet peace with the Congregationalists, as envisioned in the Plan of Union of 1801,[8] we hear the report of a letter

> from one of the leading ministers of Connecticut, who asks, "Was it not a presbyterian who publicly declared, a few years ago, that at every meeting of the General Assembly there was 'a jubilee in hell'?"[9]

Church journalists and on-the-spot historians reviewed the bitter events with bitter pens, and reviewed their opponents' accounts with the happy spirit of one of the Princeton reviewers, who said of a New School effort

> We do not feel called upon to enter on any extended consideration of the subjects introduced in the two

---

[6] MGA 1837 scattered throughout. The bulk of the proceedings have to do with the abrogation of the Plan of Union of 1801, the dropping of the four Congregationalist Synods, the solemn protests against these actions, and the answers to the protests, together with actions excluding the voluntary-society Home Mission and Education organizations from the Presbyterian territory.

[7] Samuel Miller, Letters to Presbyterians, p 46.

Compare Sidney S. Baxter in Richmond to F[rancis] McFarland in Philadelphia, August 24, 1837: "The contention is fiercer in Virginia than I had anticipated...." MSS, ALS. In the Francis McFarland Collection at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[8] See Minutes GA PCUSA 1801 pp 224-225. The text of the agreement clearly prescribes an abandonment of Presbyterian order, without the required constitutional submission to the Presbyteries for ratification.

[9] In the New York Evangelist, as quoted in the Princeton Review, 1837, pp 478-9.

> concluding chapters of this book. The author manifests here the same disposition to put the worst possible construction on the language and conduct of others, to present every point in the light best adapted to cast odium on his brethren, and to avail himself of all the controversial arts of a partizan writer,[10] which characterises the other portions of its work.

In 1837 it was all over except for the shouting; but in 1838 there was a lot of shouting. The Minutes for 1838 come in two sets, one for the New School and one for the Old School. They read like a tale of diverging Heinlein time lines. The opening paragraphs are the same. Last year's moderator preaches his sermon from the same text in both editions. But as the time comes to organize the Assembly the stories fade off in their respective directions, each account regretting the noise and obstruction of the other faction.

> But the reading by Mr. Cleaveland still continuing, and the Moderator having in vain again called to order, ...the business was suspended during the short but painful scene of confusion and disorder which ensued. After which, the actors therein having left the house, the Assembly resumed its business.[11]

That was the Old School description of what the New School record conveyed as Mr. Cleaveland's remarks that he

> trusted it would not be considered as an act of discourtesy, but merely as a matter of necessity, if we now

---

[10] Princeton Review, 1837, pp 478-9.

[11] MGA 1838 p 8. Such scenes are a normal part of the Presbyterian cycle. For tape recordings made live at a sampling of similar scenes in Presbyterian bodies in modern times, consult the Living History Program of the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

> proceed to organize the General Assembly for 1838, in the fewest words, the shortest time, and with the least interruption practicable.[12]

In the end we have two Assemblies, meeting in separate buildings, each claiming right, truth and dignity as its own.[13]

What were the issues?

All the participants at the time agreed that there were three major and interrelated issues: Theology, Polity, and Operations.

In addition to these three issues which all admit were fundamental to the split, there were two more issues which have been alleged as involved in the Presbyterian disruption of 1837-38: Sectionalism,[14] and Slavery.[15]

That these last two were increasingly the general issues of the day would be a commonplace in American history of the

---

[12] MGANS 1838 p 10.

[13] MGANS 1838, p 15. The elders of the Seventh Presbyterian Church had sent a note to Dr. Beman informing him that the Seventh Church building would be available only for the General Assembly to be organized under the gavel of the retiring Moderator of the 1837 General Assembly. So Dr. Beman's rump New School Assembly repaired to the First Presbyterian Church to continue its course.

[14] See Crocker, Castastrophe, pp 52-3; "...Liberal Presbyterianism being of New England origin and wearing the impress of New England sentiments, is the object of attack with the Old School Party." He continues this line of argument. See also Brown, A Sermon, etc., p 13. See also below, pp 36-37.

[15] This was increasingly a New School charge, not during, but after the disruption. A fuller discussion follows below, pp 37 - 40.

period. That they were issues which divided the Old School from the New would be much harder to show.

First, the issue of Theology.

The actual dividing line was not, "Do you embrace the New Haven doctrines?" but rather, "Do you believe that there is room in the Presbyterian Church for men who hold the New Haven doctrines?"[16]

Ultimately this boiled down to the question, "Are Presbyterians committed irrevocably to the Westminster standards?" New School Presbyterians were willing to receive New Haven Theology men into the Presbyterian fold.[17] Old School Presbyterians found this a betrayal of Presbyterian orthodoxy.[18]

New School Presbyterians felt that God had more yet to say than had been said through Westminster;[19] Old School Presbyterians were willing to give the right hand of fellowship to

---

[16] Barnes, Our Position, pp 22-23. Theological latitude, Dr. Barnes says, as a center of the theological controversy which preceded the division, was the hallmark of the New School position. His sermon is the warmest and ablest available summary of the New School position, seen from a mellowing distance. Compare also S. J. Baird, Hist N S, p 1.

[17] This would be the immediately obvious distinction between a man like Dr. Beman and a man like Dr. Joshua L. Wilson who undertook to carry the prosecution of Dr. Lyman Beecher in the Presbytery of Cincinnati.

[18] Compare Baird, Hist N S, xii; p 18; p 1; Crocker, Castrophe, p 46; Ashbel Green in Beman, Appeal, pp 5, 3ff; Minutes of the Proceedings of the Pittsburgh Convention, p 10, the strongest possible protest against the removal of Presbytery's right to question incoming ministers as to their theology.

[19] Compare the summary of Dr. Barnes's position in this respect, and the quotation, 'the Bible...let it lead where

other views as being Christian, but not under the compact name of Presbyterian. For them, Westminster should stand, and in its traditional sense.[20]

Second, the issue of Church Government.

As with the theological question, it was not the adoption of Congregational principles that marked the New School man. Rather, the New School could better be identified as including not simply Congregationalists as such, but also those who, though themselves endorsing Presbyterian principles, felt no impropriety about the presence of Congregationalists and congregational government in the Presbyterian Church;[21] and in polity the Old School was better described not merely as those who were Presbyterian in their own polity, but as those who also felt that it was wrong to permit non-Presbyterians to operate within the Presbyterian system.[22]

---

it will, within or without the circumference of my arrangement of doctrines,' as given in Breckinridge, Letters Addressed to the members of the Presbyterian Churches, etc., p 34; The Old and The New School, (a New School view), p 40, "all wisdom did not die with Turretin, and was not fossilized in the Confession of Faith."

[20]For example, Ashbel Green in Beman, Appeal, p 4: "In the first class (Old School) we include those who put the same construction on our Confession of Faith, Catechisms, and Form of Government, that was put on those Formularies when the Constitution of our church was adopted, and for several years afterwards."

[21]See the commentary on this part of the 1838 General Assembly in BRTR 1838 pp 464-5. The point of the New School withdrawal was that many Presbyterians preferred to join the dissolved Congregationalist Synods, rather than continue in the body which had dissolved them in order to remain Presbyterian.

[22]For example, Ashbel Green as printed in Beman, Appeal, pp 56, who details the action dropping the Congregationalist Synods as being precisely "to prevent committeemen

The other way of drawing the polity line was expressed most strongly by New School men and their sympathizers. In this view, Presbygational polity as actually practiced in the Plan-of-Union areas of the Presbyterian Church was not far enough removed from the pure requirements of the Book of Church Order to warrant all the complaint.[23] What then was the trouble? High Ecclesiasticism. The Old School, they said, was made up of men determined to establish the central authority of the General Assembly, so that it could take original jurisdiction over any and all matters, destroying the freedom of the Presbyteries and fixing a high-Church tyranny on the whole denomination;[24] not high-church in the modern popular sense of highly liturgical, but high-church in the sense of highly centralized authority. To this the Old School would reply that the essence of Presbyterian polity as opposed to Congregational is precisely this regular gradation of ascending authority, and that this in fact secured a broader authority than their opponents themselves were accustomed to allowing.[25] The Old School declared it an outrage that those who had never taken Presbyterian vows to be submissive to such authority should be voting in the councils of the church which determined whether or not such powers were

---

and mere church members, from hereafter having any claim to seats in the General Assembly."

[23] MGANS 1838 pp 9, 10, recording the efforts of the New School to have the Congregationalist Synod commissioners enrolled in the 1838 General Assembly.

[24] Beman, Appeal, p 68; p 69; Charleston Union Presbytery, A Statement of the Difficulties in the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, (CUPS) pp 10-11.

[25] For example, see BRTR July 1836 pp 438-9.

pper, and which decided whether or not they should be ercised at all in specific cases.

> Are we to be threatened with the indignation of freemen and the execration of posterity [the Princeton Reviewers asked] for putting an end to this system; for simply saying to our congregational brethren, You must stop making laws for us, unless you will submit to them yourselves; you must cease deciding what our standards allow or condemn, unless you choose to adopt them?[26]

Yet although considerations such as these point to the n of Union as fundamental to the situation which was the ediate focus of the disruption, by no means all the ends of the New School were Congregationalists or neces- ily close to them by geography or background. The best ustration of this fact is the strong element of New School ttiment in the South. There, feeling themselves in many tters to be a minority in the Church as in the nation, many sbyterians looked with jaundiced eye on central author- ..[27] Even in the Old School Synod of West Tennessee, which luded the Presbytery of North Alabama, almost half the bers of the Synod entered a protest against the expulsion, cluding with the warning: "Who amidst party strife may become victims of similar measures."[28] Presbytery's hts were to some southern churchmen what states' rights e to them as southern citizens. So we find viable minori- s in Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina and

---

he same, pp 427-428.

rnest Trice Thompson in Presbyterians in the South, Vol I p 410, discusses and illustrates this from Synod Minutes. See also CUPS, which is entirely on this topic.

inutes, Synod of West Tennessee, 1837, pp 153ff, as quoted in ETT PITS I p 410.

Mississippi[29] which, refusing to approve the Old School's action to exclude the Congregationalist synods, adhered to the New School Assembly.[30] More, nearly the entire Synod of Tennessee, all but a bare five ministers and ten churches, went solidly New School.[31] The surviving Synod of Tennessee -- Old School -- could not even muster a quorum when it first tried to meet after the disruption. And most of the area around Charleston, South Carolina, stayed out of the Old School when 1838 had come and gone, giving essentially this reason of fear of unfriendly central authority. At the same time they refused to join the New School either, on the grounds that it was essentially a Northern body in which Presbyterians of the South could find no real understanding.[32] The remaining loyalist Presbytery of Charleston was reduced to a sad state indeed.[33]

---

[29]The Presbytery of Morganton in the Synod of North Carolina collapsed shortly because a large proportion of its Ministers and Churches went New School. See the Minutes of Morganton Presbytery, MSS, in the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina. Compare Thomas H. Spence, Jr., Southern Presbyterian Reviews, p 9, for account of Alexander Newton, a New School journalist in the New School Synod of Mississippi, to such success that his paper enjoyed the official commendation of both the Old and New School Synods in that state.

[30]ETT PITS I p 410.

[31]MGA 1839 1840 Stat Tab; ETT PITS I pp 409-410.

[32]CUPS pp 21-32. See also below, pp 258 - 259 .

[33]Minutes of Charleston Presbytery, MSS, Narratives of the State of Religion, throughout this period. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

Third, the issue of Operations.[34]

The Old School and the New School were also in collision on the issue of what was the best way for Christians to carry out the large benevolent and evangelistic tasks which

---

[34]For illustrations, see Beman, Appeal, pp 46-70; 69-70; The Old and the New School, p 38; Peters, Absalom, A Brief Answer, etc., scattered throughout; J. L. Wilson, Four Propositions Sustained Against the American Home Missionary Society (III. The AHMS is not an ecclesiastical, but a civil Institution; IV. By interference and importunity she disturbs the peace and injures the prosperity of the Presbyterian Church.); Cushman, An Appeal to the Christian against the allegations contained in a pamphlet written by J. L. Wilson, entitled "Four Propositions Sustained.....". For more on Presbyterian / AHMS, see Ashbel Green in Beman, Appeal, p 10, "the baneful apple of discord which has been thrown into the midst of us, is the inflexible purpose and untiring effort of the Corresponding Secretary of the A. H. M. S. to amalgamate the Board of the General Assembly with that society."; S. J. Baird, Hist N S p 443; Report of the Minority in the Convention on Domestic Missions, pp 307, alleging pre-convention misinformation to fool delegates; BRTR 1837 p 468, for 6 reasons to oppose excluding AHMS from Presbyterian area; pp 117 for outline of the process by which AHMS captures Presbyteries with AHMS men. This is a dangerous power "because it is pre-eminently irresponsible."; Miller Letter V, LTP p 78, "voluntary, and of course, irresponsible associations."

For concise, full-dress summary and analysis of relationship of AES and AHMS to anti-Presbyterian theology and polity, and manipulation of Presbyteries, see especially James Wood, The Doctrinal Differences etc, pp 236-238.

For full discussion of the inherent impossibility of "non-sectarian Christianity," see BRTR, July, 1836, p 432. This remains the definitive work on this topic.

For sample of atmosphere, see F. T. Brown, A Sermon, etc., quoting Dr. Van Rensselaer's Narrative, N. VI., as

the century and their awakened, revived Christian lives had opened up before them.[35]

Simply put, the Old School answer was that the work of the Kingdom had been committed to the church and could rightly and best be discharged by the church.[36]

Equally simply put, the New School answer was that the work of the Kingdom had been committed to the believers,[37] and could rightly and best be discharged by them in national societies of Christian benevolence, subordinate to no ecclesiastical jurisdiction and enjoying the patronage of interested Christians from all churches.[38]

---

follows: In the 1836 General Assembly, the Old School proposal to elect a Foreign Mission Board was defeated, 110 to 106. "Immediately after, the Assembly adjourned for the day, the New School in exuberant spirits. In the vestibule of the church, one of them -- and he a leader -- exclaimed, rubbing his hands with glee, 'That's the last kick of Presbyterianism.' But, if we are correctly informed, Presbyterianism is still alive, and -- kicking." (p 26).

[35] I am indebted to Dr. Lefferts A. Loetscher for the orientation of the preceding paragraph, and this question which follows it.

[36] Compare the First of Wilson's Four Propositions Sustained: "The Lord Jesus Christ has committed the management of Christian Missions to his Church"; BRTR 1837 pp 102-3, 123; Wood, Differences, pp 7-8; Synod of Kentucky in Sweet, ROAF, II, pp 265-8; Synod of Mississippi and Alabama, Minutes, 1834, p 35, as quoted in ETT PITS I p 299.

[37] See the Majority answer to the Protest, MGA 1836, pp 291-192.

[38] The same. See also Miller Letters, IV, pp 63-65; BRTR 1837 p 468; and Barnes, Our Position, pp 28-29.

The Old School had long history and precedent on their side, at least so far as Home and Indian missions were concerned. Those had been a Presbyterian Church operation from early colonial times.[39]

But on their side the New School had recent history and success. The new works of widespread Bible distribution and overseas mission had been initiated and developed with distinction in America by two outstanding voluntary societies, the American Bible Society and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.[40] The first, the ABS, cultivated all denominations of Christians with success on the basis of an appealing job and impeccable non-sectarianism -- the Bible, the Bible alone, the Bible pure and simple, the Bible without note or comment.[41] The second, the ABCFM, pioneered in foreign missions, drawing its candidates and its constituency from both Presbyterian and Congregational bases, with a sprinkling of Dutch Reformed and others.[42] When Presbyterian Boards of Home Mission and of Education [of Candidates for the Gospel Ministry] flagged,[43] the American Home Mission Society and the American Education Society were

---

[39] See above, pp 13-14, for a note of the rise of alternatives.

[40] The voluminous Minutes and Annual Reports of these Societies constitute in themselves the raw material to support a whole series of instructive studies. Their surviving Archives are an untapped ocean of primary source material bearing on literally hundreds of major topics and personalities.

[41] The recurring note of the Annual Reports of the ABS.

[42] See Annual Reports of the ABCFM to 1870, when GANS connection was formally discontinued.

[43] See ETT PITS I pp 366-8 for analysis of relationship between GAHMB and AHMS.

ready to apply Bible Society and ABCFM methods to the same field -- with such success that they were a contributing factor to the decline of the strictly Presbyterian enterprises.[44] When Presbyterians of Old School convictions essayed to undertake denominational foreign missions,[45] the New School's greatest weapons of opposition were the high esteem, grand record, and continuing Presbyterian connections of the ABCFM.[46]

It is in order here to deal briefly with the two other issues sometimes advanced as important in the Old School - New School division.

First, the possible issue of Sectionalism.

That sectionalism was also an issue between the Old and the New School would be difficult to maintain on the basis of documentation.[47]

---

[44]Compare BRTR 1837 p 468.

[45]MGA 1835, 1836, and covering discussions in BRTR.

[46]The same. Compare also F. T. Brown, A Sermon etc, p 26.

[47]As for example, Sydney E. Ahlstrom of Yale maintains when he says that the "Old School - New School division of 1837 can probably be regarded as the first great ecclesiastical South-North separation." (A Religious History of the American People, pp 659-660). Ahlstrom continues at Yale the great Latourette tradition of the broad brush. The reader is grateful, though often finding the details garbled in matters of which he has first-hand knowledge.

The southern boundary of the New School lay, of course, somewhat to the south of Jackson, Mississippi.

There was a sectional skewing: one third of the Old School, but only one eighth of the New School, was Southern. Seven eighths of the New School, but only two thirds of the Old School, were Northern.[48]

Yet at the same time, however tinged with sectional orientation the two Schools may have been, they did fail to reflect a clear-cut sectional division: both New and Old School had vigorous Southern as well as Northern wings; New and Old School each had substantial strength in both East and West.

If there was a truly predominant geographic divider, it was the line putting major New School strength from Albany west; and this is not along what is usually thought of as a sectional line in the United States.

We can conclude, therefore, that sectional considerations were abroad in the Presbyterian Church of 1837-38, but that the division when it came was by no means along sectional lines.

Second, the alleged issue of Slavery.

More serious is the charge that the New School and the Old School were divided from each other over the issue of Slavery --- more serious because slavery carries a moral weight most Christians will feel keenly.

---

[48]Exact statistics are difficult to pinpoint. Both Assemblies reported constituencies for a while that did not adhere to them, and both have gaps in their statistical tables. There was also some local confusion and shifting back and forth, to judge by the figures and listings. For the best concise summary, see John Robinson, The Testimony and Practice of the Presbyterian Church in Reference to American Slavery.

As early as 1838, the year of the division itself, Zebulon Crocker was listing "1. The recent excitement in different parts of the church in respect to slavery and abolition" as first in his catalog of four causes of the disruption. This was in his Catastrophe of the Presbyterian Church in 1837, published in New Haven;[49] Crocker may be said to be a representative of the New England Congregational allies of the New School. Similar claims were to be heard from New School quarters in succeeding years.[50] And as late as 1936, -- a hundred years after the Old School was defeated at Pittsburg in mid-Assembly by the arrival of that steamer-load of New School adherents from the Western Reserve[51] and determined to come back in 1837 to settle the arguments (and the Western Reserve) forever,[52] -- William Warren Sweet included "the question of slavery" on his list of four causes of the controversy.[53]

Thus New Haven and Chicago on what happened in Philadelphia.

---

[49] P 55.

[50] Compare E. H. Gillett, History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, vol 2, pp 521-527, for an example of a discussion of the relation of the slavery question to the various constituencies of the General Assembly.

[51] See above, p 24 , Note 4.

[52] It could be argued that the burst of determination which the Old School party demonstrated between the adjournment of the 1836 and 1838 Assemblies was triggered by the visible, palpable and mortifying shift of the balance of power in the 1836 Assembly when identifiable Commissioners from the identifiable Western Reserve arrived.

[53] Sweet ROAF p 100. See also Loetscher TBC pp 5, 6.

The most thoroughgoing modern attempt to substanti-

But the anti-slavery[54] anonymous author of "The Old and the New School," writing in The American Presbyterian in Philadelphia in 1859, shortly after the New School at last lost its southern presbyteries, is emphatic that

> the subject of slavery, which now constitutes so prominent a feature in the distinction between the Old and New School, and in reference to which the New School is so prominently characterized before the community, constituted no part of the difficulties between the Old and New School parties in the church before the division, nor were the differences of views on that subject in the General Assembly in any way determined by the lines which divided those parties on other subjects. The position of the New School in "advance" of the other body on this subject is one which has been the result of development, and of the fact that so large a part of the New School body is in the Northern States, while the present position of the Old School on the subject now is to be traced mainly to the fact that so large a portion of their body is found in the Southern States of the Union.[55]

Faced with this difference of opinion, what clues may we take to point us to the actual facts?

First, in order to establish slavery as more than a

---

ate the charges which New School spokesmen began to raise after, but not before, the disruption, was made by C. Bruce Staiger in "Abolitionism and the Presbyterian Schism of 1837-1838," The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 36:4, December 1949, pp 391-394. For reasons developed below, pp 39 - 40, Staiger's thesis is untenable.

[54] "The New School," he writes, "now occupy a position on that subject which it was not anticipated at the time of the separation, and which places it in a position of eminent advantage over the Old School." That is, in his eyes anti-slavery is the preferred position. (p 41).

[55] Pp 31-2.

generalized issue of the times, it would seem reasonable to have to show three things:

(1) that it was advanced as an issue in the debates;

(2) that the pro-slavery leaders were in the Old School, the anti-slavery leaders in the New; and

(3) that when the split took place, the division of slavery and anti-slavery forces followed the line of division between the two schools.

By all three of these criteria, slavery was not an issue:

(1) Both sides refrained from advancing it, and for the same reason: each had a strong pro-slavery element, which if alienated would cost that side the necessary votes to prevail.

(2) Strong pro-slavery leaders were in each school; Frederick Augustus Ross of the New School was second to none. Strong anti-slavery leaders were in each school; the most violently abolitionist Presbyteries were in the Old School, and eventually withdrew to form an anti-slavery Presbyterian denomination.

(3) After the split, both Old and New Schools for twenty years had the same history: their anti-slavery men could not get a majority in the General Assembly to take a more forthright stand against slavery than the muffled 1818 pronouncement of the undivided church. Both schools were a mixed bag on slavery.

We must conclude that although slavery was a pervasive issue touching everything in America of the 1830s, it was not one of the issues on which in 1837-1838 the Old School Presbyterians divided from the New.

THE PRESBYTERIAN SITUATION AT THE CLOSE OF 1838

We can now summarize the situation for the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America at the close of 1838.

It was the eve of the Fiftieth anniversary of both the Republic and the Presbyterian General Assembly.

Having grown from some 170 Presbyterian ministers in its connection in 1789, this largest group of Presbyterians in America had grown to "twenty-two or [twenty-] three hundred ... before the late schism...."[1]

Now, going into 1839, some 1,270 of the 2,300 ordained ministers were claimed by the Old School, and some 1,200 by the New. Both, were national bodies. Neither was in New England significantly. The New School could claim especial strength compared to the Old in upper New York State and the Western Reserve; the Old School could claim to be less sectional and more national in character on the basis of its southern strength being greater proportionately than that of the New School.

Turning for a moment to the New School, we have seen

---

[1]For further details, see John Robinson's survey in The Testimony and Practice of the American Churches in Reference to American Slavery.

that its theological atmosphere was marked by openness to change and openness to significant differences from the Westminister statements of Reformed theology. In polity the New School embraced a sizeable Congregational segment of ministers and congregations, and welcomed them within the larger Presbyterian frame of reference. And in its benevolent structure the New School was wholly committed to carrying out its benevolent operations through the agency of the National voluntary societies. A denominational mission effort was to the New School a mark of narrow sectarianism, denying charity as well as efficiency.

Before turning to a brief summary of the state of the Old School as the Fiftieth Anniversary Year unfolded, we should note for the benefit of those who contemplate research in this period that recent Presbyterian historians have generally speaking tended to be New School in sympathy, temperament or heritage. We have taken one example of the results of this tendency, the widespread assertion that slavery was one of the dividing issues between the two schools, and have shown that the facts, easily accessible, do not appear to support that assertion,[2] no matter how often made, over how long a period of time, nor by whom.

It would be an interesting undertaking for a scholar who is attracted by the long-range implications of the issues and developments of this period to take other commonly received and repeated statements about the Old and New Schools and test them against the wealth of primary data which is available.

We can notice also at this point that up through the division and into 1839, we have found no voices saying that

---

[2]See above, pp 37 - 40.

the benevolent structures of the new American Presbyterian awareness would constitute a major addition to polity. Once our attention is called to it, we can see that the benevolent structures, whether internal or external to the existing church structures, were bound to be an enormous addition to polity. But most Presbyterians today still do not think of the great multi-million-dollar national and international Boards and agencies of their church in terms of polity, of formal church government. They think of the Boards and Agencies, when they think of them structurally at all, as mere creatures of the General Assembly, to be created, revised or destroyed by the act of any annual Assembly. Yet it can be little short of astounding that the Boards and Agencies of the church have never been made the subject of legislation in the constitutional documents of any major Presbyterian denomination. It is equally remarkable that the benevolent structure is not so much as mentioned in the theoretical and philosophical architecture of Presbyterian theologians in their formal Ecclesiology.

Yet, as we shall see, some Presbyterian theologians and pastors did sense this dimension of the problem posed by the dynamic explosion of Christian benevolent work in America, and addressed themselves to it with vigor. In the present study, the principal focus of our attention will be, in fact, their twenty-year effort to call attention to the practical and theoretical effect of large benevolent operations in the church, and to make clear their implications for Presbyterian church government.

In the Old School branch of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, scene of their ministry, Presbyterian theology was nearly universally held to be the Westminster Standards, taken relatively strictly and seriously. Presbyterian church government was seen as the form

set forth in the written constitution of the church. Where the constitution was ambiguous or silent there could be and would be differences of opinion. But there was no disagreement on the main outline. The ascending series of courts were taken for granted. Only the definition of their precise jurisdiction and powers might cause debate as concrete cases arose. All agreed on the necessity for each Minister and Elder to affirm the Westminster Standards. All agreed on the right and duty of Presbyteries to examine all ministers and candidates applying for memberships.

For benevolent work, the Old School was agreed to a man that her Redeemer required the church in her organized ecclesiastical capacity to carry out the commission he had given her to go into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them all things whatsoever that he had commanded.

This meant that the Old School branch of the Presbyterian Church in the United States would sever her connections with the offending voluntary national societies,[3] and carry on

---

[3]The break with the American Home Missionary Society and the American Education Society was immediate. The break with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions came more gradually and at a later time. Some of the national societies, of which the American Bible Society is the best known and has survived to modern times with continued Presbyterian endorsement and continued prominence, though in form identical with the other societies were in practice not generally brought under the onus which attacks on the theory of voluntary societies should supposedly have subjected them.

For the best discussion of the history, nature, timing and rationale of the Presbyterian break with the various national voluntary societies, see Earl Ronald MacCormac's Yale dissertation, The Transition from Voluntary Missionary Society to the Church as a Missionary Organization Among the American Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Methodists.

her own work through boards and agencies of her own appointment, answerable directly to herself.

The Old School was agreed

1) That the benevolent work of the church must be done by the church herself in her organized capacity;

2) That the benevolent work of the Church must not be done by non-denominational Boards acting as agency of the church.

This agreement itself posed a practical question for the Old School: Granted that the church herself must do her own good works, how, by what means, by what arrangements, by what structures, may or must the church carry out her benevolent works?

This, in our terms, is the formal topic of the debate which James Henley Thornwell of South Carolina led in the Old School branch of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America between the disruption of 1837-1838 and the disruption of the Civil War.

Let us turn now to the personalities who took leading parts in it.

As our period opens, Thornwell is a very young pastor, just at the beginning of his ministry, a man of outstanding ability, versatility and promise. The account of his enlistment in support of the proposition, that the Presbyterian church must at all costs do her benevolent work without recourse to Boards, begins with his attendance as a Commissioner to the reforming Presbyterian General Assembly of 1837.

THE DEBATE

THE ENLISTMENT OF JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL

The Presbytery of Bethel paid high tribute to its brilliant young minister, James Henley Thornwell, in sending him to the pivotal General Assembly of 1837. We may imagine that those determined to effect a reform in the church, and determined to achieve a majority in the General Assembly to be able to do so, would have been sure before Thornwell's election as a commissioner that he was at one with them on the issues against the New School.

At all events he was chosen, and arrived in Philadelphia late but in time to place his vote on the side of the Old School as it abrogated the Plan of Union and moved to clean house against the four most congregational synods founded upon the Plan.

Philadelphia, May 26, 1837.

My Very Dear Wife:

> ...I just reached here at the point of time for the agitating questions that will come up before us. Mr. Robert J. Breckinridge gave notice this evening, that he would introduce a motion tomorrow for the appointment of a committee, to consist of equal members of both parties, for the purpose of devising the most peaceable mode of dividing the Presbyterian Church. I have no doubt but that this Assembly will settle all the difficulties of the Church. We shall, in all probability, get rid of

the New School men, and be enabled hereafter to preach and propagate the gospel without molestation or controversy. Men, who heretofore have been moderate, are now taking high ground. The importance of the questions at issue begins to be generally felt....

The results of this Assembly may and will be felt to the end of time. The future history of the Presbyterian Church will depend, under God, upon the measures adopted now, by the highest of her judicatories. There should be much prayer, much study of the Scriptures, and much watchfulness over our words and thoughts. May the Lord preside in all our deliberations, and order all things so as to promote His glory, in the building up of Zion and the spread of the truth....

You affectionate husband,
J. H. Thornwell[1]

Here is complete identification. "We" shall get rid of the New School men.

Already as able a public speaker as any within the house, Thornwell kept his resolve to keep his eyes and ears open and his mouth firmly shut. Nine days later -- General Assemblies were not so frantic in schedule in those days as they have become under the benefits of rapid transportation and instant communication -- he writes,

The vote was taken to-day on excluding the Synods of Utica, Geneva, and Genessee, which, with the Synod of Western Reserve, will make four Synods that have been excluded from the Church.... The work of reform seems to go on prosperously; the Lord has opened up an unexpected door of deliverance to his people.

I know that you feel anxious about me, that you entertain fears about my temper and spirit. You may

---

[1]J[ames] H[enley] Thornwell to Nancy Witherspoon Thornwell, from Philadelphia, May 26, 1837, as carried in B[enjamin] M[organ] Palmer, The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, D. D., LL. D., p 212. Paragraphing added.

> make yourself easy on these points. I have not opened my mouth in the Assembly or Convention, except to give a vote, and I do not expect to do so. ....
>
> The Lord has shown me, in the proceedings of this General Assembly, that there is no confidence to be placed in man; that the best of us are weak and erring mortals, who cannot see afar off.[2]

Thornwell wrote his wife that the mutual recriminations and personalities which marred the debates were due in part to the policy of the New School men -- "Our New School brethren in too many instances, have made their speeches only to the galleries; in other words, their object seems to have been to produce a popular impression against the orthodox. We have been hissed from the galleries three or four times today."[3]

> They have treated the questions which came up before us with a great deal of unfairness; and one hour spent in the General Assembly would convince your mind that the two parties ought never to meet again in the same body. They have no confidence in each other; they are wide apart in spirit, principle, and doctrines; and nothing but confusion and disorder can result from their being united.[4]

We can picture this young minister, just three years into the pastorate and about to begin his long association with the faculty of the South Carolina College (since become the University of South Carolina). Permanently impressed by the character and measures of Robert J. Breckinridge, attending the sessions of both the Convention and the Assembly, and absorbing everything he saw and heard with that mind which everyone who knew him testifies missed nothing and forgot

---

[2]The same, pp 212-213.

[3]The same, p 213.

[4]The same.

nothing, Thornwell set out from Philadelphia for Cheraw as one who with a whole heart had joined in this "work of reform."

It is notorious of reformers that they are easily satisfied with a smashing victory. Too often they imagine that the house once swept can gather no dust, much less devils, or that the enemy once soundly defeated will never regroup. But these reformers were of a different stamp. Both their leader, Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, and his followers who formed the core of his reforming majority at the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1837, have left convincing evidence that they took neither a naive view of the effort necessary to consolidate their reform, nor a frozen concept of what would constitute effective accomplishment of their goal to secure a vital, revived, thoroughly Presbyterian Church which fulfilled its gospel responsibilities at a high pitch, making an effective contribution to the conversion of the world.

First, the leader.

The dust was still in the air from the draconian measures of the General Assembly of 1837 and their enforcement by the General Assembly of 1838, when Breckinridge brought out two articles on the Boards in his own monthly journal, the Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine. The man who had saved the Presbyterian church from the evil of relying on independent volunteer societies to do its God-given work for it, was now prepared to express publicly his misgivings about the Presbyterian church's own Boards. Were they so put together and so operated that they could be called the Presbyterian Church at work in her ecclesiastical capacity? Breckinridge thought not; and though the expression of his doubts in the August 1840 issue of his magazine is not so fully developed as later expressions of the same doubts would become, they are worth recording not only for their inherent interest

but also as a benchmark against which to measure later developments of the Old School Reformers' attack on the Boards and the Board system.

Second, the correspondence among Breckinridge's sympathizers and supporters shows that many of them were aware of the danger of resting at ease in Zion, and that they were anxious for themselves and their colleagues to avoid the trap of self-satisfaction and complacency.

Three of these letters, hitherto unpublished, arising out of the ordinary daily convictions of representative Southern members of the Old School majority of the Presbyterian Church, were written to Thornwell and survive. In them we can trace the materials on which, with parallel influences in conversations and meditations now lost to us, the young Thornwell came to embrace the concept of ongoing reform in general, and a program for reform of the administration of missions in particular. They merit close attention because they show both the atmosphere and the principles which would mark his position in this area as long as he drew breath.

The first is from another young South Carolina pastor, Pierpont E. Bishop.

Like Thornwell, Bishop had been orphaned early. Like Thornwell, he owed his education to the generous and intelligent interest of others. Unlike Thornwell, he had gotten his education at Hampden-Sydney and the senior Union Seminary. Eight years older than Thornwell, he had been longer getting to and through his schooling. He had been ordained by Bethel Presbytery as pastor of Bethel and Ebenezer churches in 1834, in the same year that Thornwell was being licensed

preparatory to being installed a year later in Lancaster in his first pastorate.

He had followed with keen interest the dramatic General Assembly of 1837.

Writing from Ebenezer to his friend on June 21st, 1837, Bishop knows that Thornwell must be glad to be back after his absence at the North. From his own full heart he offers touching remarks on the subject of the heightened sense of family ties a man feels when he comes home from distant journeys. It was a precarious age. Thornwell was about to lose his little daughter, and would have been much appreciative of this Christian encouragement from his brother in the Lord.

Bishop is much concerned about the Presbyterian church now that the battle in Philadelphia has been so well won.

> I do rejoice[, he writes,] in the results of the last Assembly. "The Lord hath done great things for us whereof we are glad."
>
> But the work of reform is not yet done and I feel concern yet for the safety of the church: we are now exposed to a two fold danger:
>
> 1st There is great danger that the orthodox will be elated with their success. God has given it I verily believe, but the church must be humble for his blessing to continue.
>
> 2d There is also danger that we conclude the work is done and cease to pray or relax our efforts.
>
> It has been also been a serious ground of fear with some valuable men in our church that when we are freed from the present difficulties we sink into a state of formality.
>
> May the Lord keep us humble and continue to rest

his blessing that the church may be purged from error and appear again in its beauty --- .... P E Bishop[5]

His wife Adaline added a postscript: "Kiss little Jeanne for me. NAB" We can sense some of the warmth, and mutual support, among the Presbyterian ministry of those days. With

---

[5]P[ierpont] E. Bishop to James Henley Thornwell at Columbia, from Ebenezer in Bethel Presbytery, Synod of South Carolina, June 21st, 1837, p 2. MSS, ALS. Paragraphing added. Thornwell Collection, The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

Pierpont E. Bishop was born in Amherst County in Virginia in the year 1803. His mother, a Presbyterian of intense piety, was left a widow with the care of her family when Bishop was quite young, and took charge of his early education. She grounded her children thoroughly in the two Westminster Catechisms.

In 1821 at the age of eighteen Bishop made his profession of his own personal faith in Jesus Christ as his own savior, and began to feel a call to the gospel ministry. With no funds for tuition, he and his mother made the opening of this door a matter of prayer. Through the concern of the Rev. William Shields Reid, D.D., the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Lynchburg, Virginia, a society of benevolent ladies in that church took it as their responsibility to see him through school.

Graduating from Hampden-Sidney College in Virginia in 1829, he finished Union Theological Seminary in 1833, was licensed to preach by West Hanover Presbytery, and began his ministry under ordination by Bethel Presbytery in South Carolina, at Ebenezer and Unity Presbyterian Churches.

Among the various congregations which Bishop served during the course of his ministry in South Carolina were Yorkville, where for six years he conducted an Academy; Zion, which he organized; Bennettsville; and Great Pee Dee, named for the river.

He married Miss Adaline McKnight of Statesville,

their memories of orphanhood, both of these young men were in a position to appreciate with full hearts the ties of friends and family.

Later in the summer the Thornwells had been through deep waters, and another friend, Cyrus Johnston, wrote to him to express his sympathies and to encourage him in the Lord in his time of trouble.

Turning to the matter of the Assembly, from which Thornwell had returned with excited and solemn accounts of how Robert J. Breckinridge had mobilized the forces of righteousness and led the church out of her captivity, Johnston says,

> I had read with interest in the weekly prints of the doings of the Assy. Their importance will not be appreciated during our age. The historian in some

---

North Carolina. Of their three children, two were daughters. Their son, Samuel Edwards Bishop, was for many years a pastor in the Presbytery of Harmony in South Carolina.

Earnest in business and devoted to the cause of a vital religion in a sound church, it is written of him that besides ministering to the people of his settled congregations, he "ministered to the destitutions of the neighborhood." He was a commissioner to the General Assemblies of 1839, 1851, and 1858.

The materials for a study of the life and work of Pierpont E. Bishop may be found in the Minutes of Sessions, Presbytery and Synod, the records of his College and Seminary, in the materials in the Local Church History Program of The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina, and in the obituary notice in Wilson's The Presbyterian Historical Almanac for 1859-1860, pp 66-67.

Letters from Bishop are scattered through collections in various repositories and have not at present been drawn together by catalog or copies.

future age will look back upon the Assly of 1837 as forming a grand era in the history of Presbyterianism in these U. S. and in the world -- and as a period when an impulse was given to the dissemination of evangelical truth of such magnitude as to form the Second Reformation.

In all these things I do rejoice, & will rejoice. Tho the spirit of revival seems to have fled from us, yet I cannot but entertain the hope that the day is not far distant when we may see glorious things.

The contest for elementary, fundamental principles is now settled. But it remains for future assemblies, synods, and presbyteries to carry out the reform. I trust there is a sufficient degree of decision, firmness and love of truth to do so.

And I have lately had the thought deeply impressed upon my mind that Bethel [Presbytery] had need to make a great reform. Tho I fully believe every member is doctrinally orthodox, yet I as firmly believe that we do not carry Presbyterianism out in its practical detail. Every minister and church is the property of the Presbytery, and under her control in the Lord. Our fathers one or two centuries ago felt this to be the case. Let the Presbytery see to it that every minister does his duty in his pastoral charge, and that every church sustains him in his work. If one church cannot support, let two or more unite -- but let us have an efficient ministry.

You may say these sentiments are in direct opposition to my practice. I grant it. But if my practice be wrong I am willing that Presbytery undertake to set it right. It is needed that Presbytery take a higher stand.[6] Now is a propitious time to do so.

Johnston goes on to mention his disappointment at the lack of professions of faith in his charge, and we gain a glimpse of Thornwell's wide and varied ministry: Johnston

---

[6]Cyrus Johnston to James Henley Thornwell at Columbia, South Carolina, August 1, 1837. MSS, ALS. Paragraphing added. Thornwell Collection, The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

closes his letter by giving details of the arrangements he and Thornwell are making for Thornwell to come and preach in a second series of evangelistic meetings.

Here then were two letters which struck the iron of Thornwell's soul while it was still glowing from the heat of the General Assembly, and while it was being tempered in adversity. Without proposing any specific measures, the letters served as reminders to him that "there is also danger that we conclude the work is done and cease to pray or relax our efforts," and that "it remains for future assemblies, synods, and presbyteries to carry out the great reform."

If Thornwell was in danger of settling down into the confidence he had expressed to his wife, that the 1837 Assembly would "settle all the difficulties in the Church" so that he and his fellow Presbyterians would "be enabled hereafter to preach and propagate the gospel without molestation or controversy," these letters alone would remind him that in an imperfect world it could be unsafe to take too much for granted.

If on the other hand he was on his own observations coming to entertain thoughts about the unfinished business of the great second reformation, they would encourage him to continue to reexamine the Church so lately snatched from the hands of her oppressors.

A third and crucial letter was to come, but first there would intervene the two 1839 articles on Boards in the Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, written by its editor Robert J. Breckinridge, author of the Act and Testimony and champion of the Old School program of reform. Into this South Carolina atmosphere of reassessment and watchfulness, these articles would be welcomed as being fresh from the hand of the guiding spirit of the Second Reformation.

The title of the first was, "Facts and Considerations in Regard to Ecclesiastical Control in Benevolent Operations. Reports of Presbyterian Boards to the Assembly of 1839."

This was the article which opened the debate on the administration of missions which is the subject of our study. Because of the commanding position of its author, and because it was the seed document from which all else stemmed, we need to consider it carefully.

As students of the period are aware, during the two years following Thornwell's return to South Carolina from his ringside seat in the cockpit of reform in Pennsylvania, little occurred to put Old School Presbyterians into a torpor of overconfident calm.

The New School had come back to the General Assembly of 1838 determined to take as much of the church with them as they could, and had succeeded in making off with nearly half of it. South as well as north the skirmishing for churches and presbyteries continued lively long after the two rival assemblies had adjourned. The claimed statistics were larger on both sides than the reality, and in places the lines were still confused. It would be an unusually phlegmatic Presbyterian who would be tempted to take his ease in Zion under such circumstances. Whatever his faults, Robert J. Breckinridge was never accused of being phlegmatic.

In the Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine for August, 1839, Breckinridge addresses himself to the Annual Report of three of the four Boards of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, as presented to the 1839 General Assembly.[7]

---

[7] Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, V:8, August 1839, pp 369-384.

After a summary which presents the main features of each report, together with an account of its reception and treatment by the General Assembly, Breckinridge proceeds to his own reflections and observations. "There are several subjects, and a few broken considerations," he says, "which we think it necessary to suggest in connection with these Reports. ... Some may appear novel, others perhaps of no importance; and possibly there may be one or two, which most will regard as important."[8]

The first heads are easily summarized:

The reports should be simpler.[9] Self-congratulative "puffs" and parades of doctoral-degree initials -- "jewel[s] of gold in a swine's snout" -- are multiplied ad nauseam.

2. A cash surplus of $15,000 in the aggregate at the end of the year shows a lack of enterprise and faith.

> We take it to be clear as light, that one of the worst possible ways to get a wise and discreet Christian to give money to any cause, is to show him that you have not been able to spend properly, what he has already given you.[10]

---

[8] The same, p 375.

[9] Breckinridge was up against a trend which was stronger than he realized. By 1976, a bare 137 years later, the reports of the Boards of only one small branch descendant of his General Assembly would have swollen the Minutes to 1,094 pages of fine type, causing the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church in the United States to overrun his printing budget by an amount Breckinridge would not have believed had an angel told him about it in a vision.

[10] Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, V:8, August 1839, p 376.

3. Although the total given annually, $140,000, seems large,

> it is a mere trifle --- a fraction of a dollar, [from] each person. Surely, then..., the organs of... liberality ought at least to get out of the way of the wheels; if our Boards feel no call to pull, they ought not at least, to hold back![11]

4. The Boards go in for "a spirit of human and pecuniary glorification," with up to 80 vice presidents.

5. The Boards have paid memberships, and honorary memberships, both of which allow people to attend and deliberate at the Board meetings.

> [W]ill any Presbyterian tell us, where he finds in his standards, the liberty to sell the direction and control of the interests and duties of the Church of God?.... It is a matter of profound principle. ... Let there be an end put to buying and selling membership, office, rank, power, and influence in the church, or the church Committees or Boards.[12]

6. The three Boards which are concentrated at Philadelphia should be scattered. "It seems to us astonishing that such an accumulation should ever have been attempted, much less so long persisted in."[13]

These six items call for reform. But when he cames to his last observations, Robert Jefferson Breckinridge takes a more radical view. We find that at heart the Board problem is not, in his opinion, a problem of defects in an otherwise

---

[11]The same.

[12]The same, pp 376-377.

[13]The same, p 377.

good system. The real trouble is that the Boards of the Presbyterian Church are at root as alien to her as the Voluntary Societies are.

> We have already spoken of a spirit of servile imitation of the voluntary Boards. What else could have ever seduced our church into the idea of having Boards at all; or so long and so fixedly bound her to them?
>
> They are to us a cumbrous, and a needless machinery; --- rendered originally necessary by the impotency of the principle of independency; but entirely out of place in a Presbyterial system.
>
> They are not the Church; they are not a committee of the Church, except in a most illegitimate use of the term.
>
> Their only proper use is to conceal the real effect of their operation: which is,
>
> First, to divest the Church of its proper control over the particular subject, in the guise of a real delegation of power; and
>
> Secondly, to vest this divested power, in a few central hands, at the seat of operations, under the guise of sharing it with some hundred persons scattered over the land, and physically incapable of taking any material part in it; and who may be fortunate to escape censure, as intrusive, if they sometimes attempt it.

These Boards are an excrescence upon Presbyterianism, --- to which they have no affinities, and in relation to the true action of which, they are useless or hindrances.

Formerly, the Assembly appointed Standing Committees, to this work. This is the proper mode. Let a Committee of moderate size be appointed on each important subject; let it be really a committee, and really responsible; let it be a separate committee for each interest; and let them, if necessary, be distributed.

Then the Church will really do its work; and the work will be really done on ecclesiastical principles. Then we shall no longer be at sea; but be safely in

port, --[14]as a working, scriptural, Presbyterial organization.

This, we shall find, is the core of the argument which will be made against the Board for twenty years.

Two months later, in the Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine for October, 1839, Breckinridge addresses himself to another kind of Board.

In this brief piece he remarks that although the Voluntary Societies do tend to remove sectarian prejudice, a flaw appears in them as they begin to view themselves as alone competent to carry on large benevolent works.

> Notice...the insinuations and even sneers that appear in some papers, as to the unfitness of church courts for managing missionary and other operations, in which large sums of money must be handled, as though none but sharpers were wise enough to attend to this department; and forgetting too that Elders, Deacons, &c. are often merchants, and sufficiently numerous to co-operate with the clergy in this business.[15]

Breckinridge has an answer to those who contrast unfavorably the contentious atmosphere of denominational assemblies with the harmonious spirit of the annual meetings of the voluntary societies:

> [L]et a society be formed to transact all kinds of church business that involve differences of opinion -- all cases of discipline that excite deep feeling, &c. -- and leave to church judicatories only such matters as occupy the attention of the associations now in existence -- and especially those about which true

---

[14]The same, p 378. Paragraphing added.

[15][Robert J. Breckinridge,] "Voluntary Societies." Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, V:10, October 1839, p 451.

> Christians can unite -- and perhaps we will then see whether the mere term voluntary can act as a charm to dispel all discord from human society.[16]

The truth is, says Breckinridge, the root of the harmony is the propaganda. "Observe," he suggests, "...the tendency of these meetings in leading many to glory in their organizations, and [to] speak of them in such a way as to shew that they consider the church of Christ herself, in her organized capacity, as eclipsed by these luminaries."[17]

In conclusion, Robert J. Breckinridge notes an overtone in some of the voluntary societies -- he does not specify, but in his lifetime the temperance, women's suffrage, and anti-slavery societies could have qualified for what he had in mind -- to move towards defiance of civil order and lawful authority.[18]

Breckinridge is now ready to present his credentials and his conclusions about the societies. As a member of several voluntary associations, he helps them according to his ability. But he would guard, however, "against the tendency to abuse, which is so obviously connected with such bodies. And so soon as the church can be induced to do her own work, and thus 'come up to the help of the Lord against the mighty,'" he will "cheerfully vote for the dissolution of them all."[19]

If other minds had not taken the themes of these two articles and built on them, it seems unlikely that these

---

[16]The same.

[17]The same.

[18]The same, pp 453-454.

[19]The same, p 454.

pieces would attract our attention today except as a part of the prodigious output of one of the prodigious Breckinridges, to be listed in his bibliography and handed a footnote once or twice a century.

Brief though they be, key words and phrases are there. They will serve as building blocks in a larger structure. They will recur in the debate for two decades. Among them are these:

The Presbyterian Church was seduced into Boards by association with Congregationalists who needed them.

The Boards are a cumbrous and needless machinery for Presbyterians.

The Boards are not the church nor a Committee of the Church.

The Boards divest the Church of its proper control.

The Boards place this divested power in a few central hands.

The Boards are an excrescence upon Presbyterianism.

The aboriginal phrase from the early stirring of the Old School is there: The church of Christ herself, in her organized capacity.

The rallying corollary is there: So soon as the church can be induced to do her own work.

The important principle of weighing not so much present facts and situations so much as observable tendencies and probable consequences is there: [I]ncidental tendencies... are of great importance, and should be closely observed.

The Divine institution of state and church are both there: God...gave directions for the organization of... the Church...[and] the State....

The proposition that Jesus Christ gave the church her organization is there: [C]ertain characters [suppose] that the Lord made a mistake in organizing a church[.]

A positive modification, which will be a central theme of the debate on the Boards through the next two decades is there:

> Let a committee [of the General Assembly]...be appointed... for each interest.... Then the Church will really do its work; and the work will really be done on ecclesiastical principles.
>
> Then we shall no longer be at sea; but be safely in port, ---as a working, scriptural, Presbyterian organization.

Robert J. Breckinridge has shot another arrow into the air from his self-replenishing quiver. In a little over a year he will learn where it was it fell to earth.

Meanwhile, further down at the South, James Henley Thornwell had been in either conversation or correspondence with a cousin of his wife's, a man he would have had ample opportunity to know and respect. He was John Witherspoon of Hillsboro, a man many years Thornwell's senior, venerable and admired by all who knew him. Coming to Columbia from Cheraw, Witherspoon had been attacked by an incapacitating illness which forced him into retirement from the pulpit and back to his earlier haunts in North Carolina.

We do not have earlier examples of their correspondence, but it is clear, from this letter which the older man wrote Thornwell in the spring of 1840, that Thornwell had at least

mentioned the subject of his own views on Boards to him. As events unfolded, it seems probable that this letter was important in the development of the case against the Boards, and in finding a champion for a different way of carrying out the church's mission. Hitherto unpublished, it appears to be a hinge on which Thornwell's decision to join the debate turned.

To form a proper judgment of the letter, we should first read it, then analyze it.

After a page on other (often theological) subjects, Witherspoon comes to what we are most interested in:

Hillsboro March 3rd 1840

My Dear Brother James -

.....

In relation to your views of Boards, there is much to be said for & against:

For - 1st The benefits resulting from Union
2d efficiency - 3d General interest -4th a superintendence over a large space, which may secure more unanimity & fidelity in action.

I believe the above, comprehends all.

Contra - 1st The Presbytery - is the source of all spiritual power & authority in the Church. This the Boards recognise. 2d - The Presbyteries, limited by smaller bounds, are the better judges of the necessities of the churches under their care, and of the men qualified to move in the various fields under their care. 3d - Presbyteries are not so liable to imposition as large Boards - and are not so liable to sustain a needy man merely, as a Board, which desires to extend its influence. 4th - The expense of our Boards is great --

They only do, what our Presbyteries, Synods, Pastors & Churches, ought to do -- Boards then, are as I firmly believe -- helps only to lazy pastors, cold hearted

Presbyteries, benumbed Synods, [phrase obliterated] Churches. Why are Agents needed to bring our Churches up to the line & spirit of their duty? Is it because their Pastors or Stated Supplies are ignorant of the state of the world, or find no interest in the Salvation of dying millions of their fellow men! -- No No - I cannot believe that for a moment -- Is it because our beloved charges feel no interest in these things? - No -- Their contributions rebut the thought.

Why then, I ask, are agents called for -- I answer, 1st - Because of Novelty - the voice of a stranger awaken's the drowsy. 2d - The unholy diffidence of the Pastor - He fears that when he is pleading for the cause of a dying world, his people may suppose he is thinking of himself - (experientia) -- Oh my brother - who ought to have the confidence & affection of his people, if the pastor has not.

I put it to the Churches "-- Why do you contribute, more largely, to the cause of Christ on earth, when presented by an agent - a stranger, than when presented by your own tried & beloved Pastor, under the authority of of his Presbytery' -- The fact is so - And hesitate not to aver that rottenness, want of true Christian principle, is at the foundation of this gross perversion of influence.

The Pastor - the Shepherd - should guide his flock; To them, He sustains the only spiritual power, on earth, committed to him by Jesus Christ. "My sheep hear my voice & follow me" - He that heareth you, heareth me. - he that heareth me, heareth him that sent me". My Dear James, there is a revolution to take place on this subject, before our beloved Church can prosper - May God make you one of his honoured instruments in bringing this state of things to pass - Our Ministers -- Churches, people, Elders, Presbyteries, Synods, & The General Assembly, must & will awake up to this matter - we must all feel that a constable is not needed to tell an honest man, "pay your debt.

Excuse the above - if you think I go too far in my views - I have always held these notions & not unfrequently expressed them to my own personal injury perhaps, in loss of influences among those, who maintain opposite opinions. Still - I firmly believe the ground I state to be the truth of God. My health, dear brother, continues wretched - early in the winter, for 8 weeks I enjoyed uncommon ease but this spring the bilious rheuma-

> tism has returned upon me just as it did the two past springs in Columbia - Oh, how often in the last ten weeks, how I <u>coveted</u> the repose of the grave. ["There yet remains a Sabbath of rest to] the people of God." Your friend
> wife has fitted up one,
> for him
> .....
> My Susan joins me in love to both & <u>all</u>
>
> God bless you dear brother & your <u>good Nancy</u> -
> Truly yr.
> J Witherspoon[20]

We can never know with unqualified certainity the springs of action in the mind of a man. Yet this letter from John Witherspoon of Hillsboro offers a strong clue to how Thornwell came to enter the Board controversy.

We have seen Thornwell at the General Assembly of 1837, inspired and encouraged by the hope of purity and peace and freedom for his church and her ministry.

We have seen him being reminded at his friends' hands that the work of reformation must continue.

We have seen that Breckinridge, in Thornwell's eyes the hero of the church's deliverance from her enemies, had raised again the general question of the voluntary societies, using terms in which an analytical mind could find material for reflection and trenchant phrases for futher application.

Now, in Witherspoon's letter to Thornwell in March of 1840, we find a man years Thornwell's senior, close to him by

---

[20]John Witherspoon [of Hillsboro, North Carolina] from Hillsboro to James Henley Thornwell in Columbia, March 3, 1840. MSS, ALS. Thornwell Collection, The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

ties of acquaintance, association, and kinship, taking the Board question and carrying it much further than it had been when the primary aim of the Old School was simply to get free of the outside Voluntary Societies.

Witherspoon furnishes an outline which goes much beyond the generalities of Breckinridge's short piece. Brief as this letter is, upon analysis we find in it these new items to consider:

1. The Presbytery as the source of all spiritual power and authority in the church.

2. The Presbyteries as the better judges of the situation for domestic mission work within their bounds.

3. The Presbyteries as the better judges of the character and effectiveness of home missionaries within their bounds.

4. Boards as the death of Presbyterial responsibility.

5. Agents as the death of effective work in the field of stewardship by local pastors.

6. Want of true Christian principle as the foundation of gross perversion of the true Presbyterian system, which should be the work of pastors under the authority of Presbyteries.

But more than these, and most impressive of all, is Witherspoon's direct appeal to his young colleague to recognise the situation and play a strong, personal, determined part in the changes that yet need to be made:

> My dear James, there is a revolution to take place on this subject, before our beloved Church can prosper - May God make you one of his honoured instruments in bringing this state of things to pass.

Whether these words were only a strong factor entering into the series of events which led the rapidly maturing Thornwell to take a lead in this part of the unfinished business of 1837, or whether, as seems more probable, this letter marked the definite impulse which set James Henley Thornwell on his way into lifelong leadership in the Board controversy -- the 1839-1861 debate in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America on the administration of missions -- we do know this: John Witherspoon of Hillsboro wrote to Thornwell.

And Thornwell read it. He kept the letter the rest of his life.

By midsummer his mind was made up. "I am satisfied," he wrote to John Douglas, his old classmate at South Carolina College, "that there is a dangerous departure, in the present age of bustle, activity, and vain-glorious enterprise, from the simplicity of the institutions which Christ has established for the legitimate action of the church.

> He has appointed one set of instrumentalities, and ordained one kind of agency in his kingdom; but we have made void his commandments, in order to establish our own inventions.
>
> I believe that the entire system of voluntary societies and ecclesiastical boards for religious purposes, is fundamentally wrong.
>
> The church, as organized by her Head, is competent to do all that he requires of her. He has furnished her with the necessary apparatus of means, officers, and institutions, in sessions, presbyteries, elders, pastors, and evangelists.
>
> Let us take Presbyterianism, as we have it describ-

ed in our Form of Government, and let us carry it out in its true spirit, and we shall have no use for the sore evil of incorporated boards, vested funds, and travelling agencies.

If it is wrong to hold these principles, it was certainly wrong to lay down such a form for the government of the church; and if we do not intend to execute the form, let us cease requiring our ministers to assent to it.

Such is a skeleton of my views.[21]

---

[21] James Henley Thornwell to the Rev. John Douglas [the younger] of Purity and Concord Churches in Bethel Presbytery, August, 1840, as given in John B[ailey] Adger, My Life and Times, pp 367-368.

BRECKINRIDGE OF BALTIMORE OPENS FIRE

At about the time John Witherspoon of Hillsboro was writing to his young friend in Columbia to decry the Agents and the Boards they represented, and to charge him to do something about it, Breckinridge's Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine was publishing a blast against Agents under the title of "Hints on the Agency System."[1] Coming from a correspondent who would for the next two decades lift his vote and voice for reform of the Board system wherever the opportunity presented itself, its attack on particular feature of the Board approach to the administration of missions evidently may have helped to keep Breckinridge's concern with Boards from flagging.

Whether conversations or correspondence were added to his input, by the time Breckinridge began to prepare copy for the October number of the BLRM he was ready to expand his earlier position. Where in August 1839 he had voiced trenchant criticism of Presbyterian Boards on both practical and theoretical grounds, and where in October of the same year he had been concerned with the Voluntary Societies and was ready

---

[1] [Benjamin Mosby Smith, as] A Village Pastor, "Hints on the Agency System." The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, VI:3, March 1840, pp 117-120.

to do away with the lot of them whenever the Church was prepared to do their work herself, by October of 1840 Breckinridge is ready to mount a full attack against the Presbyterian church's own Boards. He has been reading their reports as presented to the General Assembly of 1840, and he does not like what he sees there.

In a major article, "Considerations on the Reports of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church," Robert J. Breckinridge sets forth an amplification of his criticism of the whole system of Church Boards from the standpoint of Presbyterians committed to the principle that the church herself should do her own missionary and benevolent work, as contrasted with earlier attacks on Presbyterian Boards from the standpoint of those like Absalom Peters, who held that all such work was best done by interdenominational cooperative voluntary agencies.[2]

"In proportion as the Presbyterian church has purged herself from the leaven of error," Breckinridge began, "she has in the same degree, bestirred herself to extend the truth."[3] Her office bearers have a solemn responsibility to press that extension; her still remaining class of secular, self-seeking office bearers, are, alas, among those best described as "a people who will not work, [a people]...far more sure of destruction, and far less to be pitied, than a people robbed...."[4]

---

[2]See above, pp 33-36.

[3]Robert J. Breckinridge, "Considerations on the Reports of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church." The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, VI:10, October 1840, p 445.

[4]The same, pp 445-446. Breckinridge, like most of the writers we shall be dealing with, organizes and marshalls his

> The reform in the Presbyterian church, [Breckinridge continues,] begun in 1837 and 1838, is one of the most remarkable and providential, in the history of God's people. It will be found, also, unless we greatly misjudge, one of the most enduring in its effects, one of the most extensive in its influence. It is, however, to be remembered, that this reform is not complete; that it was a work of years which brought us to the brink of ruin; and that it must be a work no less protracted, that can heal thoroughly, the hurt of the daughter of our people.
>
> . . . . .
>
> What we allude to, is the fact, that we have, as a communion -- through a long career of timidity, and amid years of diminished zeal and fidelity, acquired habits of thought, of action, and of feeling -- which are alien to us; and which must be changed before our reformation is complete.[5]

It seems clear, Breckinridge thinks, that to have any highly developed state of practical efficiency, a church must have at least four things:

1. Clear views of the work it ought to do;

2. Scriptural modes of operation;

3. Efficient modes of operation;

4. A high, active vigorous spirit.[6]

---

material in such a point by point, rational and orderly fashion that the presentation fairest to his mind and method is ordinarily one of extract, condensation, or summary, almost always in the order in which he himself presents his material. Footnote hopscotch is ill adapted to an adequate handling of the close, methodical writers of this period.

[5]The same, p 446.

[6]The same.

With this introduction he is ready to take up the reports of the Boards to the 1840 General Assembly -- the Board of [Domestic] Missions, the Board of Foreign Missions, the Board of Publication, the Trustees of the Assembly, the Trustees of the Seminary, and the Board of the Seminary. The important thing to remember, he remarks, is that so far as the reports tell of good being done and work being advanced, our hearts are glad; but at the same time there are grounds for real uneasiness.[7]

They are,

1. The Church is not sufficiently alive to her real vocation. She does not appreciate her position, her resources, her power, her mission, her means to accomplish it.[8]

2. What is the reason? He believes he knows what it is.

> We allowed ourselves to be persuaded, by a close corporation at Boston, and two or three voluntary committees in New York, for so long a period -- that we were still in our childhood; and that if we ever arrived at maturity, it would only be to obtain a kind of under-service, in the outer courts of God's house: that we have, in a degree, the spirit of our long, degraded, and stupifying servitude to Independency and Semi-Pelagianism, still animating our free proceedings -- and their idle and inefficient forms, hindering our liberated action. -- The things in which we truly had small profit, while we were exercised thereby, are things of which instead of being now ashamed, we are still hindered by their remaining influence over us.[9]

3. Breckinridge sees this as a part of a general loss of the sense of oneness in the Reformed world since the days of

---

[7]The same.

[8]The same, pp 446-447.

[9]The same, p 447.

its emergence. Fragmented, the different parts of the great world-wide Reformed connection have variously drifted away from their unity and solidarity. Why should not the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, perhaps the largest in the world amongst her sister communions in the Reformed family, take the lead in a revitalized faith and life? "Who will lead our people towards it?"[10]

But what are the reasons why this church has not more thoroughly and more rapidly awakened herself to her duty and her destiny? They are

> to be found in the very means themselves by which it has been attempted to make her act. And to this subject we desire to direct the attention of our readers; more especially as it involves
>
> (1) Ecclesiastical Boards, and
>
> (2) permanent paid agencies for collecting funds.[11]

Breckinridge has now identified by title two features of the existing Presbyterian system that he and his colleagues would continue to attack throughout the two decades of debate. We should be careful to note just what these two things were.

First, the Boards themselves. These are the bodies elected by the General Assembly. They corresponded to and were patterned after the Voluntary Societies. They were large. Breckinridge speaks of "Boards of eighty or a hundred members," and some were larger than this. They were not working bodies. Only a small per cent of their membership

---

[10]The same, pp 447-448.

[11]The same, p 448. Subnumbering supplied.

appeared for the Board meetings. Those who did appear, were the working bodies, for the brief time the Board was in session. Membership could amount to something in the way of work, then, but for most members the effect was honorary, whether or not the membership carried the adjective honorary in the election.

Second, the Agency system. Money to run the benevolent enterprises in the 1840s came from collections by agents and not from any kind of regular offerings made in the churches. As we shall see at the meeting in November of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, a typical survey would show that only a small per cent of a synod's churches would take up even an annual offering for a given cause, and the majority would take up no offering for benevolence purposes at all.[12] The agent canvassed the churches trying to get an opportunity to preach and take up an offering for the cause he represented; and he canvassed wealthy Presbyterians directly for contributions.

Breckinridge, then, places his opposition to the Presbyterian church's own Boards on four grounds.

> [F]irst, that they are a virtual surrender of the principle of ecclesiastical control.
>
> The Assembly appoints these boards, upon a nomination previously made up and agreed to by those in possession; and that is the sum total of its real authority practically exercised over them.
>
> They are no more a practical exertion of ecclesiastical control, than the boards at Boston and New York would have been if the Assembly had appointed them to do its work for it.
>
> Their members are not members of the Assembly;--

---

[12] As carried in the manuscript Minutes of Harmony Presbytery.

they are, as to very many of them, not even eligible to seats in the Assembly[.]

[T]hey are appointed for such periods of services as to be absolutely independent of every particular assembly, except, by abolishing them and erecting new ones[.]

[I]n every respect they are, in their nature, office, and movement, thoroughly Congregational -- and as thoroughly not Presbyterial.

Secondly[,] they are of no sort of use.

The Board of Foreign Missions meets once a year; and even then, sometimes, (as at its last meeting) refuses even to hear the minutes of its own Executive Committee, for the preceding year, read.

Other boards meet monthly; and then, A. B. and C. approve, as a board, what C. B. and A. did as a committee.

Boards of eighty or a hundred members, usually muster a dozen at their meetings.

At these meetings any attempt to call in question the doings of the Executive Committee is considered ungracious[.]

[I]n one most important board, that of Publication, the Executive Committee had, and perhaps still has, co-ordinate power, with the Board itself, as to some of its most important functions.

Thirdly[,] our experience teaches us, as reason also shows, that the great effect of these boards is

(1) to cast all power into a few central hands -- and

(2) [to] render them as independent as possible of the action of the Assembly.

The notion of any responsibility in these boards is a mere figment.

Two or three persons control the proceedings of the Executive Committee; and then when the Board comes to

review their doings, they have become the doings of the Committee, and have the weight of that whole body, and for this reason, should be, as they argue, and are generally confirmed by the Board: then the same doings are, for a like reason, approved in Assembly: and the church having Committee, Board, and Assembly to vouch, of course approve: but remotely -- A. and B., after all did the thing, and there never was any just or real supervision of their action.[13]

Fourthly[,] these boards, with other nominal ecclesiastical operations, are so located and filled, that in truth, the Presbyterian church is managed, through these contrivances, by about two or three dozen persons -- in all its great practical operations.

Their efficient managers are as absolute a hierarchy as exists upon the face of the earth; and if they are the best hierarchy of all -- nay even a Presbyterian hierarchy -- still, let its true nature be distinctly seen and known.[14]

Breckinridge as he did his research for his article was not content to rely on his own extensive personal experience as a member of several of the Boards, and his own personal acquaintance with the church's leadership. He first listed the

> seven large organizations in the eastern part of our church and country; viz.:
>
> 1. The Board of Missions;
> 2. The Board of Education;
> 3. The Board of Publication;
> 4. The Board of Foreign Missions;

---

[13]Robert J. Breckinridge, "Considerations on the Reports of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church." The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, VI:10. October 1840, p 448. Paragraphing, additional italics, and sub-numbering added.

[14]The same, p 449. Paragraphing and additional italics added.

5. The Trustees of the Assembly;
6. The Directors of the Seminary at Princeton;
7. The Trustees of that Seminary.

> We have already seen how it is, that in the most of these, the practical and efficient power resides, permanently, in a very few hands; and that, really without responsibility, since their power is exerted in other names.
>
> We will now point out how it may be, nay truly how it is, that the same hands...become the common receptacle of the power of the church, in all its modes of action.[15]

Breckinridge now lists on paper in his study the names of all the individuals who were connected with the seven General Assembly Boards. He finds that the same names from the Philadelphia area appear on all the lists, and these are the people who attend the meetings.

> We have before us [he says,] lists of all the names connected in May, 1840, with all the seven organizations named above. It is a list of which any church might be proud; but it is not the church; and it leads the church into a grand error, as to who control its affairs.
>
> There are, in effect, residing in Philadelphia, about one dozen persons, ministers and laymen, who are the real Board of Missions, Board of Publication, and Board of Education; and who have the official power to be largely all the rest, if they please. ....
>
> Now is there a man in the whole church, who would be content to permit such a result, if it were nakedly propounded?
>
> Not one.

How then are men persuaded to put up with this state of

---

[15]The same, p 449.

affairs? By interposing

> a variety of contrivances, called Boards, Committees, and what not; and then, the whole church, very calmly submits to it; though really the result is nearly the same.
>
> Is there a man in the church, who believes that any four or five ministers in Philadelphia, are at all superior to four or five hundred of their brethren; much less so much so, as to justify such a result -- even if it were otherwise scriptural, constitutional, profitable, modest, or Presbyterial?
>
> Not one.[16]

In a year's time Robert J. Breckinridge has consolidated his published position on the question of mission administration. In August of 1839 he was ready to attack Presbyterian Boards sharply; in October of 1839 he said he would be ready to get rid of the Voluntary Societies at such future time as the Church becomes ready to do the work herself. Now in October of 1840 both the object of his vote, and his time-table, have been changed:

> We unhesitatingly say ... that, in our opinion,
>
> (1) <u>these boards ought all to be abolished</u>;
>
> (2) that the Trustees of the Assembly and the Seminary, should be active, competent, and experienced men of business;
>
> (3) that all the other organizations ought to be substituted by committees -- one for each object -- all made up of different persons -- appointed by the Assembly from time to time -- responsible to it -- and thoroughly Presbyterial, in reality as well as in name.[17]

---

[16] The same, pp 449-450. Additional paragraphing added.

[17] The same, p 450. Paragraphing, subnumbering, and additional underlining added.

This is a major shift. It is a substantive proposal, perhaps as radical in the field of mission administration as the proposal to get rid of the New School in one stroke by abrogating the Plan of Union and withdrawing membership in the General Assembly for the mixed bodies which had arisen through its operations had been a revolutionary proposal in the field of church polity.

Having made his proposal, brief and clear, Breckinridge goes on to attack eight evils common in or inherent in the Board system, all of which evils can be done away with immediately and simply by the abolition of the Boards themselves.

They are

1. The practice of buying membership in the official governing bodies of these organizations.

2. The practice of appointing long lists of vice presidents to any of them.

3. The subjection of any one of them to the dominion of the civil courts of the State of Pennsylvania.

4. The existence of any one of them as an independent corporation operating under its own charter.

5. The practice of passing by their year's work with two or three set exhortatory speeches during a morning session of the General Assembly.

6. Their tendency to a narrow local control.

7. Their tendency to a narrow personal control.

8. Their "hierarchic Presbyterianism...of which the

Bible and our fathers have left no trace nor record."[18]

As for the system of "a paid and permanent agency for the collection of funds," Breckinridge admits that he is speaking purely out of duty. The General Assembly, the church Press so far as it has spoken, and the majority of the church at large, have all approved the system. But it is no good.

First, it utterly fails in its means and results. It does not reach annually one in five of the churches for any one Board, and not one in three, take them all together. "[T]o call that a system...[is] trifling."[19]

Second, our agents are better paid than our pastors.[20]

Third, it is inferior to "a state...in which every pastor would willingly do his duty; and every Presbytery would take care that he did it."[21]

The system is a failure. Breckinridge says, get rid of it. What is the alternative? Expand it to an adequate effort? This would cost sixty to seventy thousand dollars a year, about half the present yearly contribution of the churches to all General Assembly Boards combined. This would be intolerable.[22]

---

[18]The same, p 450.

[19]The same, pp 450-451; "[It] would not be worth while to urge it, under the present state of public sentiment." (p 452)

[20]The same, p 451.

[21]The same, p 452.

[22]The same, p 451.

We gather that Breckinridge sensed what the principal argument of the defenders of the Boards was going to be. It was relatively easy to see the deficiencies in the Boards. They were too glaring to pass unnoticed. But the work was in progress. The work in progress required substantial funds. To abolish the agents would be a disaster until other sure means of raising the money were in hand and proven. "Critic," the defense would run, "what better alternative do you suggest, when the one certain thing is that if our present system is bad, we dare not embark on a worse?"

Here the practical pastor comes to the fore. He opens up the Session book of the Second Presbyterian Church of Baltimore and reads off what that church, "not of the richest class," had done by its own giving as compared with what agents have raised in visits. The prize goes to direct congregational giving, hands down. The example of the latest year is $8,700 congregational benevolent giving against $400 congregational benevolent giving through an Agent who came by.[23]

The pastor who becomes a critic of the Boards will not have it easy. With a great record of giving -- to the Boards -- without the use of Agents, what did the congregation and pastor get in the way of thanks?

> [T]he aforesaid agent, in the midst of his vast, unrequited, and profitable labors, made a written proposal to the Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions in New York -- to do what -- reader, do you suppose?
>
> Only, to dismiss the pastor of the aforesaid congregation from the Board, for the good of the cause! That's all.

Is it wonderful that with such a spirit, in our

---

[23]The same, pp 452-453.

> masters, nothing can be reformed, and nothing done by the pastors of our churches?[24]

Here another key phrase is added to the vocabulary of debate: our masters. In 1840 this word's connotation was grim.

But the theoretician will not be altogether silent in the presence of the practical pastor.

> In the present state of our church, what we need, [Breckinridge mused,] is an agency, very limited and very select; an agency not so much to get money, as to organize our affairs, and enlighten and rouse our people, and especially our church courts; an agency, not to go round and round our large cities and strong churches, acting without a fixed plan, covering ultimately every part of the church: but an agency that shall be able to lay down, and erect a great plan that will work by its own force, when it is fully set up.
>
> One great mind, in each of our agencies could do this in due time, if he could be got, and then permitted to do it.
>
> Such an agency would be a blessing, not to be appreciated; but any thing short of it, is at once transient and inefficient.
>
> To secure such an agency, and to preserve, appreciate, and uphold it, when obtained, requires an organization like that we have ventured to suggest in the forepart of this paper; an organization, simple, strong, real, adequate to the work, and impregnated with its spirit.[25]

At this point the father of the reform measures of 1837 is clearly looking for help. He knows that the present

---

[24]The same, p 453. Paragraphing added.

[25]The same, p 452. Paragraphing added.

system is not working. He knows that the Presbyterian church as a whole can do better in benevolence than it is doing, because many a congregation in it is doing better. And he believes he knows why the system is a failure: it really is alien to the Presbyterian idea of how a church is put together.

But Breckinridge is uneasy at the point of the practical substitute for the present system. If there were only a great mind to hammer the right system out! Or better, a great original mind for each of the Boards. He is sure that the answer, if a system has to be the answer, is the Presbyterian system, plus perhaps a system of getting that system aroused and at work in accordance with its own genius of pastors in Presbytery.

He turns to his readers with a calm composure:

> Such are our views.
>
> If our readers find in our boards and their operations, a general state of things responsive to them, supposing them to be correct; we shall be happy to be mistaken in that respect. If the views themselves are erroneous, then they at least have this to commend them, that they are not in favor in high quarters.
>
> That our church ought to do more than she is doing -- none can doubt. That the individuals who control and regulate her operations, might do far more, with a better organization, and on more efficient principles; and more especially, by a more suitable division of labour, power and office, seems to us equally clear.
>
> And if these observations should tend to have more done, or what is done, better done, their sole aim is attained.[26]

---

[26]The same, p 453. Additional paragraphing supplied.

BENJAMIN MOSBY SMITH DROPS SOME HINTS

Robert Jefferson Breckinridge's definitive article calling for the abolition of the ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was a leading feature of the October, 1840, issue of his The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine. In the same issue Benjamin Mosby Smith, under the pen-name "A Village Pastor," continued his earlier attack on the Agents and the Agency System with a longer follow-up article called "More Hints on the Agency System."

In the course of his discussion, the Village Pastor (after a page devoted to criticising his critics and defending his bona fides as a Presbyterian of the Presbyterians) draws a careful distinction between agents and agencies on the one hand, and the Agency System on the other. Temporary agencies and temporary agents for specific or emergency situations are no problem to him. But a permanent system -- that is another matter altogether.[1]

> The first and most important objection to the agency system, is its unpresbyterial, [2](I had almost written anti-presbyterial,) operation.

---

[1][Benjamin Mosby Smith as] A Village Pastor, "More Hints on the Agency System." The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, VI:10, October 1840, pp 465-466.

[2]The same, p 466.

To illustrate what he has in mind, he pictures the Presbyterian system of ecclesiastical organization, with its ministers and elders, Sessions, Presbyteries and Assembly, as being comparable in its sphere to a civil government. What would be the reaction if a government gave up its dependence on its own officers and structures to govern?

> Shall the State in addition to the executive already in power, and charged with certain duties, appoint agents to traverse the country for the same object? Would not this be a confession that the existing system was either defective in theory or impracticable?[3]

But this is ridiculous. What have we fought, bled and died for in our struggles to be shut of the New School? "To establish and perpetuate our system," the Presbyterian system of belief and church government. This system in the early days did well in conducting missionary operations, in educating our youth.[4]

> What voluntary society, what machinery of boards, what system of agencies, ever conducted missionary operations, and made provision for educating our youth, in a more efficient manner, than did our early Assemblies, with their committees and pastoral agencies?
>
> True, when we compare amounts, the present day is far before those days. Yet who will say, before them in the same proportion, as we exceed in numbers, -- as we have become more enlightened in duty, -- as we have increased in wealth?....
>
> Let the several objects be presented to the chur-

---

[3]The same. For two examples in recent history in which Smith's hypothetical situation has actually arisen, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, pp 90-91. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[4]The same, pp 466-467.

> ches, and their management conducted by the Assembly. Let the Presbyteries and church sessions act as the executive. Let each Presbytery call on all its members, at the regular meetings, for the amount of contributions, in the several churches.
>
> The Assembly, of course, must in this case appoint an executive committee, and the proper financial and corresponding officers; and, when possible, let them be laymen.
>
> The plan might work slowly at first, but it required some time to set up the present system. I verily believe in the end, we would be more prosperous, more united and do far more for benevolent purposes than we now accomplish.[5]

Confident that the Presbyterian systems of pastors and courts can do better, the Village Pastor -- subsisting on village support and village fare -- is acutely conscious of the high overhead in the Agency system. "In New York city alone, I have good authority to say, $40,000 will not pay the annual expences of the various charities for secretaries, agents and clerks."[6] Such sums seem small in terms of the debased currency of the late 20th Century, but meant more to readers who could and did live on $600 a year. But the Village Pastor, while disliking the expense, thought other things about the Boards more important. Warmed up to his subject, he now produces a phrase we shall hear echoed from wall to wall in the ensuing years of debate on Presbyterian mission administration:

---

[5]The same, p 467. Paragraphing added.

[6]The same. Br? Smith was born too soon. For three examples of the eventual development of this pattern, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, pp 91-92. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

> [T]he <u>expense</u> is not the main objection.
>
> The system, if a permanent one, <u>is a fungus on Presbyterianism</u>; if an expedient, as the Assembly seemed to think, instead of propping it up, let us get rid of it, with all possible expedition, and adopt our own plan.[7]
>
> As observed in the "Hints," the system is reproductive of its causes, and the longer it is continued the longer it is needed.

We have all heard that Congregationalism was the source of this fungus, but Smith, while agreeing, adds more. "It is equally a product of Episcopacy....which must have a personal head."[8] The truth of it is that we are off the main point when we evaluate the Agency system simply by asking whether or not it is useful. "The question is,... whether or not, as a system, <u>they are an excrescence</u>...."

"Fungus" and "excrescence" are not mere invective. They are the heart of the argument:

> Now the object of agents is to diffuse and promote an enlarged Christian benevolence. Is not this already comprehended in the pastoral office? ...
>
> The question is not, whether agencies may not be very useful, but whether they are not, as a system, an excrescence: whether they are indispensable. The pastoral office comprehends agencies. Every pastor is an agent. Institute an order of <u>soi disant</u> revivalists, and it may presently be said, (as was said, in substance, some years ago,) "were the church what it should be, there would be no use of" revivalists. And so an opening is made for every innovation, by which our church has bled, and over which good men have wept.[10]

---

[7]The same, p 468.

[8]The same.

[9]The same, page 469.

[10]The same, pp 469-470.

The Village Pastor, before reaching the climax of his case, detours to criticise the Princeton Review's recent defense of the "necessity of the agency system."[11] Princeton, it will be remembered, though Smith does not say so here, came late to the cause of reform, and (to look ahead) would one day be reproached for wanting to freeze all reform at the level achieved in 1837-1838.[12] Princeton would find many opponents of many sorts on many issues in the years to come; this is perhaps the earliest occasion for her to be reproached in print on the Board issue. Hodge, who had been physically incapacitated during the fighting years on the floor of the Assemblies leading up to the disruption,[13] was

---

[11] The same, pp 468-469.

[12] See below, pp 462-463.

[13] Charles Hodge accomplished a long lifetime of work in spite of two protracted occasions of crippling disability, by dint of a methodical, determined will, and a fundamentally sound, tough constitution.

Struck first, before 1830, by a never satisfactorily diagnosed infection of some sort in his thigh, in time it became severe, so that it was not until 1842 that he began to be able to be out again. As his son recorded it,

> [At first,] he suffered only as he was limited in his powers of locomotion, by the weakness and tenderness of that leg. But in the spring of 1833, he was commissioned to canvass the Presbyterian Churches of the city of New York, for the purpose of collecting money for the erection of the new chapel for Princeton Seminary. He made several visits to the city, and spent many days in going over its vast distances on foot. The result was a violent and permanent aggravation of his disease. The pain became severe, the distress occasioned by walking unbearable, and the limb shrank in size. He returned home, and was put almost at once upon his back, and subjected to a most violent system of

doggedly carrying out his duties on his couch in his study, writing on a board strapped to his arm when he could not even sit up. His physical immobility concentrated his attention, even more than his usual academic bent would have done, on the printed page and the written word. To criticise the Princeton Review in print was to risk arousing Hodge. We can

---

counter-irritants....

> His couch occupied during the day, from September, 1833, precisely the same position in his study as that subsequently occupied by his chair until the time of his death, a period of forty-five years. The chair in which all his students and surviving friends remember to have seen him either sitting or reclining was given to him by his brother, November, 1839, and was thenceforward used by him exclusively as long as he lived....
>
> In the spring of 1838, he believed that he had made no progress toward recovery, and becoming impatient of the old methods, he urgently pressed upon his physicians the propriety of his trying either the hot springs of Baden in Germany, or those of Virginia. After much discussion and many plans, he settled down to trying the effect first of warm baths, and then in October 1838, of the cold douche upon his lame hip and thigh, in his own home. With the use of the latter, the tone and strength of the limb gradually returned, and he slowly increased his exercise, and laid aside first one crutch and then the other, and finally settled down upon the support of a cane which he used until the end of his life.
>
> . . . . .
>
> He has marked as a note attached to his daily record of the weather, under date of July 16th, 1842, "Preached in Elizabethtown for the first time since 1833;" that is[,] this was the first instance of his preaching in that time. Again under the date of September 18th, 1842, "Preached in the Chapel for the first time." And on the 19th of June, 1843, "Walked to town (the village) for the first time in ten years." (A[rchibald] A[lexander] Hodge, The Life of Charles Hodge, D. D., LL. D., pp 234-238.)

imagine that Hodge would have taken an active interest in the Boards and their detractors in any case, but this early reference from the Village Pastor cannot have helped to keep Hodge from settling his weight down on the other side of the balances.

> The time, it is hoped, is past, [says Smith,] when the pastoral office was made to nestle under the shadow of revivalists and agents, tracts and temperance tales, "young Christians," "corner stones," and other instrumentalities, by which the wisdom of this world professed a competency to fill the earth with the knowledge of the Lord. I cannot indulge the thought, that the reviewer designed to degrade the pastoral office to a level with a human institution. Still the sentence is unfortunate.[14]

It is not a smooth-flowing article, and Smith cannot claim either the sharp-cornered prickliness of Breckinridge, or the stolid flow of Hodge. But shortly before his close -- he in all his life will never learn how to put his main peak at the end, or how to avoid stepping on toes as he goes along[15] -- he brings things together in a main theme which would run through the debates from now on. As the Presbyterian church is constituted, he says,

> there is no need of any other order than that instituted by Jesus Christ.
>
> The Presbyterian church has no need to look beyond her system.... Organize every Presbytery and session for benevolent operation, and the sustaining power is in the body itself.
>
> Let us avail ourselves of this excellent structure,

---

[14] [Benjamin Mosby Smith, as] A Village Pastor, "More Hints on the Agency System." The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine. VI:10. October 1840, p 469.

[15] Compare the transcripts of his participation in General Assembly debates for examples.

preserve the ark of God uncontaminated by human touch, trust to its simple and beautiful arrangements, and without endeavouring to amend the work of God, do battle for Him under the guidance of his spirit, and with the weapons of his provision.

THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD IS THE PILLAR AND GROUND OF THE TRUTH: ITS DEPOSITORY AND ITS PROPAGATOR IS THE CHURCH, AND THE CHURCH ALONE, UNDER THE CONDUCT OF HER REDEEMER AND HER HEAD.[16]

---

[16] [Benjamin Mosby Smith as] A Village Pastor, BLRM VI:10, October 1840, p 270.

JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL WRITES A CLASSIC

In the fall of 1840 twenty-seven-year-old James Henley Thornwell sat down, then, to read the October number of Robert Jefferson Breckinridge's Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine.

Among the articles of the issue, one in particular caught his attention, impressed him, and gained his approval. It was Breckinridge's piece on the Boards,[1] in which Breckinridge called for their abolition.

We know that Thornwell welcomed it, because it was not long before he was quoting it favorably. Whether earlier, after his letter from John Witherspoon of Hillsboro, or later, after he had digested what he found in the October issue -- we do not know -- Thornwell made up his mind to write down the case against the Boards, take it to Synod as a proposed Memorial to the General Assembly, and let wise action follow in the train of wise policy.

Thornwell's habit in thinking was to think precisely, to think clearly, to think forcefully, and to express the result

---

[1] [Robert Jefferson Breckinridge,] "Considerations on the Reports of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church." The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, VI:10, October 1840, pp 445ff.

in a form aimed for both the understanding and the commitment of the reader or hearer. The paper which he proceeded to write, first called simply Memorial, and later "A Calm Discussion of the Lawfulness, Scripturalness, and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Boards," is the most widely known expression of the case against Church Boards. As is true of the work of so many Nineteenth Century writers in the American Presbyterian Church, it is complete, precise, lucid, arresting, and fair.

In contrast to the standard practice of the Twentieth Century, where the normal purpose of speaker and writer alike is to create the impression that there is no argument or debate, simply an overwhelming truth so obvious and so foregone and so universally approved that those who would question it or oppose it can be identified by their mere questions or opposition as either simpletons or moral lepers, one or the other, Thornwell's central habit in discussion and debate is true to the high standards of his day: to lay out the issues; to lay out the positions he takes on the issues; to advance all the arguments for his own positions, and against the positions of his opponent or opponents; then to advance all the arguments for the rejection of those <u>opponents'</u> arguments.

In a set piece, especially a set piece like this one, designed to be considered and passed by a parliament of perhaps 75 members present at a Synod, and sent up to a General Assembly of two to four times that size, there is for a careful writer like Thornwell very little gingerbread, and no fat. The 1800s are notable for this kind of clear, fair, thorough argument on both sides of every conceivable question. The century had its share of prolix and pettifogging authors and writers, but in the main its academy and

college students would put most adult leaders in church and public life of the mid-1900s and later to shame for clarity, fairness, and depth.

Thornwell, like Hodge, was bred to this discipline. The undergraduate Literary Society flourished at the College of New Jersey when Hodge was an undergraduate, as it did in the South Carolina College when Thornwell was doing his college work there. Whole generations learned as an essential point in their education that the purpose of the mind is to examine in order to think, that the purpose of argument is to enlighten in order to persuade, that the purpose of debate is to get all the facts on the table as the requirement for intelligent decision.[2]

That was the discipline which Thornwell applied to his draft. The resulting Memorial for 135 years has remained the most prominent and most easily accessible of the extant materials from the Presbyterian debates of 1839-1861 on mission administration. It is so closely drawn as to defy

---

[2]James Henley Thornwell's enormous popularity with students and young people has been largely overlooked by present-day historians and thinkers, who approach him primarily through his published literary materials. As has been noted above, his biographer attributes this popularity in part to his overwhelming and well-founded reputation for being completely fair and honest. For illustrations, see the many invitations for speaking engagements in the Thornwell Papers at The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina, and the South Caroliniana Library of the University of South Carolina, Columbia, including one from Robert L. Douglass, M. H. McBryde, and Robert G. Johnston, Committee of the Senior Class of Davidson College, March 1st, 1858, on behalf of the Class. Invitation to preach the Baccalaureate Sermon on Tuesday night, the 13th July, 1858. [This is the sermon described by J. M. P. Otts, a member of the Junior Class of 1859. See below, pp 411-419.] 3506, Thornwell Collection, South Caroliniana.

attempts to shorten it appreciably. It is so clear as to require a minimum of commentary. It is so effective as to be, as was often true with Thornwell, its own best advocate. It is so pungent and polished as at a score of points to shame scissors, summary or paraphrase.

The reader will agree, after trying him out, that Thornwell is one of those writers who is by far his own best expositor.[3] The subject which until now has been overshadowed by more pressing evils, and which only recently has begun to appear publicly, in snatches of informal writing by men who are feeling their way into the field, has now been taken in hand by a new master.[4]

The memorial is what the young pastor had in his pocket as he made his way to Synod, convening in the First Presbyterian Church of Augusta, Georgia. We may profit by analyzing it as follows.

Provided you understand his starting point, his argument from start to finish is very simple:

---

[3]This is the centerpiece up to which the earlier writers, public and private, led, and since it is the first full-dress exposition, from which most of the later debate flowed, the full text is given in the Epilogue, pp 548-578, below, with modern format and based on the now generally unavailable original text as printed in The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, VII:4, April 1841, pp 145-162.

[4]"[It has] all the imperfections of a first draft," Thornwell wrote of his manuscript. "It was written before the meeting of our Synod, with the view of presenting it to that body, and in their name sending it as a memorial to the Assembly." (J[ames] H[enley] Thornwell to Robert Jefferson Breckinridge in Baltimore, from Columbia[, South Carolina], January 27, 1841, as printed in Palmer, Life of Thornwell, p 233.

1. God in the person of Jesus Christ and through his Apostles provided the Christian Church from the beginning with pastors, elders and deacons as its officers, bound together with other churches through councils of the presbyters.

2. This was what church government was like in the most glorious and successful missionary days the church has ever seen.

3. When the church moved to other officers, other structures, the disaster of the late mediaeval Roman Catholic Church was the result.

4. The Reformation restored the Church to her New Testament days of Biblical simplicity.

5. The government of the Presbyterian Church is based squarely on the pattern given in the New Testament: pastors, elders, deacons, with pastors and elders ruling as presbyters in a series of ascending councils.

6. God gave these officers and his pattern of church government for a missionary church; to try to do missionary work any other way is to try to improve on God's own pattern.

7. Boards simply are not in that pattern.

8. This should be enough to convince a Reformed Protestant to drop them.

9. But, if pragmatic grounds are asked for, already the operations of the Boards are proving deadly to the Presbyterian form of government.

10. Get rid of them.

11. All that we ask is Presbyterianism --- simple, pure, unadulterated Presbyterianism --- the regular, uniform, healthful action of our noble system.

For a first draft it had its points. Whether they adopted it or not, he could be sure the Synod would not have seen so well written and so well constructed a paper in its history.

Thornwell could set out for Augusta with high hopes.

THOMAS SMYTH AND WALTER LOWRIE COOPERATE

The Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, to which James Henley Thornwell was making his annual journey in late November of 1840, was a parliamentary body designed, as its Presbyterian architects supposed, to find the will of God on such questions as might come before it. But in exercising this serious function, the Synod moved in accord with a prior conclusion about the answer to the main and original question faced by all churches. To understand Thornwell's relationship to Synod, and his attitude to Synod's conclusions, we should analyze first the underlying issue which, as handled by Presbyterians, resulted in the Synod's existence.

This fundamental question facing the Christian church in all her forms, varieties and branches, in all times and places, is one as simple as it is profound. On the answer to it hang nearly every form, structure, agreement, dispute, constitution, and decision Christians of any kind make together, and on the answer to this question hang the history and destiny of each twig and branch of the church in turn.

This question is, How may a body of Christians know what God's will is for them?

Broken down, it runs like this:

THE LIBRARY
Union Theological Seminary
RICHMOND, VA.

(1) How can we know what God thinks this situation is?

a) What does God think is good and right about it?
b) What does God think is bad and wrong about it?

(2) How can we know what God would rather this situation would be?

a) How would he prefer things to be?
b) How would he prefer things not to be?

(3) Given what God thinks about the present situation, and given the better situation God would prefer to see, what action does God want us to take to move things from the way they are to the way he wants them to be?

In short form, how can a group of Christians know how things look to God, how he would rather they looked, and what route he wants us to follow to change from things as they are to things as God wants them to be?

Christians have come up with four differing answers to this question.

First, there is the answer of the Christian who looks at the clear confusion of all churches at some times, and the large iniquity of most churches at some times, and who notes that where the voice of God is concerned, the church is a poor listener. He concludes, as over half the relatively few Christians in Japan today have concluded, that to know the will of God best you should stay out of churches, study the Bible, pray, and listen to God for yourself -- in contact with other Christians, it may be, but not together with them as a church.

Second, there is the answer of the Christian who looks at the loneliness of the individual Christian, and the problem of how to decide between the convictions of Christians who hear God saying different or opposite things about a situation, and decides that the decision of the Congregation,

the local group of Christians joined together in common commitment and understandings, is the best pointer to God's true will. A local church organization he and like-minded Christians will adopt; but they protect it from many ills by avoiding the superstructure which so easily loses touch with the facts of everyday life. The vote of the congregation is, in this Christian's conviction, the most reliable road to hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Third, there is the answer of the Christian who concludes that reliability in listening to God is at its best at the top. He notes that to make use of what God says to the man at the top, men need chains of command reaching down from the top. This answer says that God speaks to individuals; and that where individuals differ, the best resolution of their differences is not to take a vote, but to go along with the judgment of the most reliable, defined as the individual at the top of the chain of command.

Finally, there is the Presbyterian answer. The whole idea of Presbyterian church government can be considered as the Presbyterian answer to the crucial question, how can the Church know the will of God?

Presbyterians, frank where sin is concerned, say first that the Church cannot know God's will for certain -- all church councils can err, the realism goes; and some, it continues, have erred. But settling for less than perfection in an imperfect world, the Presbyterian answer will try for the arrangement which the Presbyterian believes is statistically most likely of all systems to find the will of God.

That system has three parts, each drawing on what are seen as strengths in the other three answers.

First, God does speak to individuals; so vital is this, that the official Presbyterian statement is flat and final to the effect that God alone is Lord of the conscience, and that no Church can bind the conscience of any man. (A high, demanding standard of conscience goes along with this; but Presbyterianism in its more than nominal forms builds solid consciences -- so much so, that one of the quick tests for identifying the merely nominal Presbyterian is to discover in him a spongy, dried-up or atrophied conscience.)

Second, where individuals differ, the Presbyterian answer says that the place to look is to the judgment of the most reliable individuals, as found by their considered votes in parliamentary bodies. Individuals, not individual; and the most reliable are defined as those whom the congregations have elected as pastors and elders.

Third, the Presbyterian answer says that when the answers found in one congregation's most reliable listeners to the will of God differ from the answers found in another, then representatives from these officers of the congregations over wider and wider areas gather in appellate bodies, by direct or indirect representation, there again to discuss the question, to listen to the Holy Spirit, and to vote.

Fourth, as a protection against the professionalism and the clericalism of the pastors, the ordained ministers, the Presbyterian answer makes the non-professional non-clerical ruling elder a required constituent part of these parliamentary bodies: the Congregation's Session, the Presbytery, the Synod, and the General Assembly.[1] This required presence, voice and vote of the Ruling elder is the Presbyterian

---

[1] In the Session the elders outnumber the pastor.

Church's answer to ecclesiastical elitism, to the tendency of all priests and professionals towards arrogance and a hunger for power.

At this point the Presbyterian system of church government is giving to the ordained ministers, her theologically trained and narrowly educated professionals, this simple message:

> In the Presbyterian system of looking for the voice of the Holy Spirit declaring the mind of God, we take votes; and we do not believe that you have a good chance of finding the will of God by listening only to the convictions of professional, full-time people like yourselves.
>
> So far as the Presbyterian church is concerned, you are not going to move her until the non-professionals, the unspecialized, have heard the Holy Spirit saying what you think the Holy Spirit has said to you.
>
> And furthermore -- even if you in your expertise are right, and these unqualified mere laymen are wrong, you are not going to move this church until you have gotten out of your offices and your studies and your seminars and your continuing education sessions and taken the time to convince at least the officers in your congregations that what you are persuaded of is, in fact, what the Spirit is saying to the churches.[2]

Such was the theory underlying the parliamentary body known as the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, to which Thornwell travelled. Erected by the General Assembly out of

---

[2]For an example in this connection of the clericalist and elitist tendency against which the Presbyterian elder's place in the Presbyterian form of church government affords a protection, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, p 131. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

the earlier Synod of the Carolinas when the Presbyterian Churches in its territory became numerous enough, and stretching originally far to the west and South across Florida and what until recently were the synods of Mississippi and Alabama, his Synod at this meeting would be taking up the question of setting off Presbyteries in Florida which one day would grow into a Synod of Florida of their own.[3]

To get past the dried-out literary form in which the debate comes to us if we expose ourselves only to its surviving texts, we will do well to take the time and trouble to marinate ourselves, so to speak, in the proceedings of an actual body of men who were the context for the debate's first major exchange.

Let us arrive then with Thornwell at the First Presbyterian Church of Augusta as the Synod gets underway.

Synod convened, the handwritten Minutes tell us, at 1/2 past 6 o'Clock P. M. on November 26, 1840. The retiring Moderator, known to us as the author of the History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina which is our primary source for much of her past, opened the proceedings.[4]

---

[3]In due course the separate Synod of Georgia was set off from the Synod of Georgia and Florida. For the later administrative history of this area, including that of the First Presbyterian Church of Augusta, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, pp 131-132. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[4]Historians would give a great deal to be able to locate the quantity of original documents which Howe obviously had before him as he wrote, and which have since altogether vanished from sight.

The Synod of South Carolina and Georgia met according to adjournment, and was opened with a sermon by the Moderator, the Rev Geo Howe D.D. from 1 Tim 3d 15th that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the Truth. Constituted with prayer.

Present

From the Presbytery of South Carolina

Ministers	Elders
D. Humphreys	James Gillan, of Rocky Creek Church
E. F. Brust	Geo. Boozer Smyrna do
E. Cater	A.C. Norris Anderson C.H. do
Wm H. Davis	S. N. Evans Nazareth do
John McKittrick	

From the Presbytery of Hopewell

Nathan Hoyt	Wm Searing, Athens Church
S. S. Davis	Wm Shear Augusta do
A Church DD	S. D. W Junkin Salem do
I. K. Talmage	Miles G. Harris Mt Zion do
F. Bowman	B. King, Roswell do
H. Safford	
A. N. Cunningham	
J. W. Baker	
G. H. W. Petrie	

From the Presbytery of Harmony

T. R. English	John Douglas, Lebanon Church
W. M. Reid	W. E. James, Darlington do
R. C. Ketchum	A. White, Sumterville do
D. W. Queen	J. S. James, Harmony do
S. Donnelly	
J. Brown	
J. C. Coit	
T. Pearson	
D. J. Auld	
M. Pedon	
H. B. Cunningham	

[96] From the Presbytery of Charleston

A. W. Leland DD	David Ardis, Breck Island Ch
W. A. McDowell DD	J. Martin, Columbia do
B. Gildersleeve	
Geo Howe DD	
T. Smyth	
J. H. Thornwell	

From the Presbytery of Georgia

Ministers	Elders
W. Baird	None
John Winn	

From the Presbytery of Flint River

J. C. Patterson	None
J. S. Wilson	
N. Dickson	
R. Chamberlain	
S. J. Cassels	

From the Presbytery of Bethel

J. B. Davies	A. Crawford, Fishing Creek Church
J. Douglas	A. Hindman Concord do
P. E. Bishop	Wm Wiley, Catholic do-
J. B. O. Wilson	
A. K. Caldwell	

Absent

.....

[P 97]

The Synod then elected A. W. Leland D.D. Moderator and B. Gildersleeve Temporary clerk. And adjourned to meet tomorrow morning at 9 o'Clock in the Lecture Room of the Presbyterian Church.

Concluded with prayer.[5]

[P 98]

At their meeting of Synod, as we see, the ministers heavily outnumbered the ruling elders; one presbytery, Flint River, having five ministers present but no elders at all. Others, such as the Presbytery of Charleston, whose Narrative each year was consistently reporting a feeble state of

---

[5]These and all following excerpts from and references to the Minutes of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia are taken from the original manuscript volume on deposit in the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina. Page numbers as shown.

religion within her bounds, had ministers in a majority of as much as two to one.

The day had been spent in arriving and getting settled and ready for the opening meeting. After the retiring moderator's sermon the evening's business consisted only of the roll, the Minutes, and elections. The Commissioners were free after adjournment to renew old acquaintances, to be introduced to newcomers to Presbyteries not their own, and to begin to sound out sentiment for projects and proposals they favored or opposed.

Then, or off the floor during other occasions which offered themselves from time to time before the subject of missionary operations was to come before the Synod, Thornwell took opportunity to try out his Memorial on men he thought might be open to its ideas. "I submitted the manuscript to a few members of Synod," his later letter to Breckinridge relates, "who cordially concurred in its leading statements."[6] John Douglas the younger was there, we see from the roll,[7] and P. E. Bishop.[8] His own Presbytery of Charleston, though weak in churches because of the massive defection of Charleston Union Presbytery in the wake of the General Assembly of 1838, had strong men: George Howe, D. D., the statesman and

---

[6]J[ames] H[enley] Thornwell to Robert J[efferson] Breckinridge in Baltimore, from Columbia, [South Carolina,] January 27, 1841. The Breckinridge Family Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. Printed in Palmer, Life of J.H.T., p 223.

[7]See above, p 106.

[8]See above, p 106.

scholar,[9] Benjamin Gildersleeve the knowledgeable editor of The Charleston Observer, that competent Presbyterian weekly newspaper, and Thomas Smyth[10] the black-haired bibliophile Irishman, would between them have enough ability to supply presbyteries ten times the size of Charleston with fame and respect. How much Thornwell may have known in advance about what the reactions of some of these men might be, we do not know. But he would find out soon enough, either in conversations or in the debates on the floor.

Next day would begin the actual work of this Presbyterian parliament.

---

[9]George Howe, D. D., LL. D., was born in Dedham, Massachusetts, on November 6, 1802, and after private studies entered Middlebury College, where he graduated in 1822.

Enrolling in Andover Seminary, he graduated there in 1825.

Dartmouth College immediately called him to her faculty where he served as professor for three years. While at Dartmouth he was ordained a Congregationalist minister, on August 7, 1827.

Joining the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1831, Dr. Howe served continuously with distinction there for over 50 years, until his death in 1883. He was the first moderator of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, elected in 1865 to preside over that body in the sessions which adopted the name to replace the title of the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America.

Howe's History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina, published in 1870, remains the standard work in its field, and was reprinted by the Synod of South Carolina in 1965 at the time a history of subsequent years in that Synod was brought out.

[10]See below, pp 143-144, Footnote 3.

[98]
It was made the order of the day at 4 o'clock this afternoon to hear the Report of the Southern Board of Foreign Missions.

....

This is significant. Here, no bigger than a man's hand, was a cloud on the horizon that was to add to Thornwell's problems each time he took his ideas on the administration of missions before an actual court of the Presbyterian Church. Thornwell's mind was past master of the abstract. Not that he was incapable of the concrete; his sermons derived much of their power from his ability to take the abstract and tie it in to experience and reality with unusual effectiveness. But in the Presbyterian Church, most ideas come up for discussion clothed in some extremely concrete and practical form. Getting a discussion about principles is hard to do; the motions on the floor more often than not are practical propositions having to do with some business already undertaken, some committee, school, Board, organization or activity that is well under way, may have been under way a long time. If you come to Synod as an idealist looking for a discussion of principle and hoping for the adoption of basic policy, it is likely that the nature of Synod's business will force you to discuss instead some ongoing institution, some accomplished fact.

So far as we can learn, Thornwell never chafed under this disability; he apparently felt at home with the practicalities. But it would always make his case harder to put across. An institution by its mere existence seems to produce a presumption that it <u>ought</u> to exist.

After dealing with routine business, and doing future generations a favor by ordering for the first time that preparations be made to print and circulate the Minutes and

the Statistical Tables, the Synod "had a recess to meet at half past 3 o'Clock P. M."[11]

Half past 3 o'Clock

Synod met. Mr. J. B. Bull, Elder of Willington Church being present, took his seat.

The order of the day was taken up, which was to hear Statistical Reports and Reports on the State of Religion.

The Presbytery of South Carolina reported....

[101]
The order of the day was then called for, viz., to hear the report of the Board of Missions which was read by W. Gildersleeve.

It was then moved that it be accepted, and referred to a Committee, consisting of Messrs. Smyth, Thornwell, Coit, Church and King to report upon the whole subject. The Treasurer's report was read and referred to the same Committee.

....

Now the stage is set. The Southern Board of Missions was auxiliary to the General Assembly's Board, and is today remembered as a joint project of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia with the Synod of Tennessee.[12] Benjamin Gildersleeve we shall meet again later; here we see him bringing in the report of the Synod's Board, with which he sympathizes and on whose behalf he has been lending both his own interest and the support of The Charleston Observer.

The Committee is small and select. Two of her members have names which survive into the next century, their causes largely forgotten, their views little consulted; still,

---

[11]MSS Minutes of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, November 27, 1840, p 99.

[12]That this was the Southern Board is clear from line 1, p 103 of the Minutes; see below, p 112.

after a hundred and fifty years, there will yet be those who have heard of Thomas Smyth the Irishman from Charleston, and of James Henley Thornwell the educator, logician, theologian and preacher from Columbia. Coit, Church and King will have been forgotten, unknown even to the most erudite professors of Church History on the most distinguished of faculties; but as we shall see, one of these last three was to prove as remarkable in the ongoing debate on mission administration as either Thornwell or Smyth, and presents an important challenge to Twentieth Century theology. That they were none of them so well known as the more famous two on the Committee is natural; it is difficult to compete with well-placed genius or with well-to-do ability when either is coupled with perseverance.

To the Committee Thornwell may have presented his draft paper as a proposed Memorial for Synod to send up to the General Assembly, or, on the advice of those he had tried it out on, he may have proposed in Committee an abbreviated version.

The day continues, working at last to adjournment with prayer.

Now we come to Saturday morning November 28 -- 9 o'Clock. The Reverend Mr. J. W. Reid has arrived, and the Reverend Mr. B. Burroughs, as have the elders Mr. Wm. McCarley and Mr. C. J. Shannon from Lincolnton and Camden.

We hear the Minutes. We have nominations for the Board of the Seminary [at Columbia] and learn that the Synods of Virginia and North Carolina decline "to withdraw the condition of their last year's proposition for the Union of the Seminaries."

The Report of the Committee on Letters and Papers touch-

ing the setting off of a Presbytery, including Middle Florida and part of Georgia, runs into difficulties; it is recommitted to the same committee with the addition of the Rev. S. S. Wilson. At last,

> [102]
> The order of the day was taken up which was to hear the Report of the Synodical Committee of Education which was made by Professor Howe. The Report was accepted.
>
> The Rev. W. Spann, an Agent for the South of the Genl Assemblys Board of Education offered his views of the subject presented by the report of the Committee, and he was followed by Dr. McDowell.

Here is the Agent for the Board of Education; and something happens. Without a transcript of remarks it may be premature to reach for conclusions; but our interest is alerted, attracted to a man who bucks the Agent, apparently with some effect:

> [102]
> Leave was granted to any member of the Synod who might choose to pursue the subject. After further remarks by Mr. Coit, the report was laid on the table.

Remembering that Coit is on the Committee on Missions, we begin to suspect that Thornwell may have at least one sympathetic listener in the Committee.

With the deck now cleared, the next item of business is the one we have come with Professor Thornwell to to the Synod to see. The Minutes are precise as to what happens next:

> [103]
>
> The Committee to whom was committed the Report of the Southern Board not being able to unite upon principles agree to present to Synod separate reports, one of the Majority and one of the Minority, both of which were read and accepted.

-- accepted, that is as information to be spread before the

house for consideration and choice.

It is with no little anticipation that we hear them. Most Synods have a well-earned reputation for steadiness; they tend to go along with majority reports. Overturning a majority report on the floor can be done, but it is seldom easy. Which will be Thornwell's? How has he fared in Committee?

It was then moved that the report of the majority be adopted, which was as follows, viz..

Resolved 1st That this Synod cordially approve of the principles set forth in the Roport of the Executive Committee on Foreign Missions, and that it be printed with the Minutes of Synod, the expense thus incurred to be borne by the Missionary funds.

Resolved 2dly That for the present at least, the appointment of a Southern Board of Foreign Missions be dispensed with, and that an Executive Committee of Foreign Missions be appointed by the Synod, with all the powers and functions of the Board to report directly to Synod.

Resolved 3dly That according to the Standing order of Synod each member be now called upon to Report, whether he has observed in his church the Monthly concert for prayer and taken up collections at the same, and whether any collections on behalf of this Board has been taken up during the year.

Resolved 4thly That this Synod would respond to the call made upon it by the pressing necessities of our General Board, it would therefore solemnly, and with all the authority with which it is invested, urge the claims of this divinely commanded work upon the attention of all its ministers and churches -- that whereas during the past year not more than twenty out of one hundred and seventy churches have reported any collections for this object, and not more than fifteen have reported any contributions from the Monthly concert, we may at our next meeting be able to report the doings of every church within our bounds.

Resolved 5thly That the thanks of Synod be tendered to Mr. Adger for his services as Treasurer of our

> Missionary fund -- that his account be approved as accurately and well kept, & that he be requested to continue his services in this office.[13]
>
> Resolved 6thly That in order to further the cause of Foreign Missions, as connected with the Board of our church, the Missionary Chronicle published by the Board and containing its proceedings and Missionary Journals, with other Missionary intelligence be most earnestly recommended to the patronage of our churches.
>
> [104]
>
> Resolved, finally That the annual sermon be preached on Sabbath afternoon, and a Missionary meeting be held on Sabbath evening in the church, under the direction of the Synod.[14]

It was clear as soon as the report began to be read that the majority were in favor of business as usual. But what will the minority report offer? We know that Thornwell bears about with him a most substantial sheaf of papers, covered with that regular clear longhand of his which is such a relief to his correspondents in an age with no typewriters and too many preachers whose handwriting would better suit bank presidents or physicians.[15] How will the minority

---

[13]This is James Adger of Charleston, Thomas Smyth's father-in-law. His son, John Bailey Adger, was for ten years a missionary to Persia under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and later enjoyed a long and honored ministry in the United States. See below, pp .

[14]Note the careful limitation of Presbytery's authority. The Presbytery might vote to hold a meeting in the First Presbyterian Church of Augusta the next night, but any service held there would be under the direction of the Session of that church, not the Presbytery. Each body was held to be supreme in its own sphere; only matters rising to Presbytery on appeal from the Session, or requiring an unusual action by Presbytery in the vital interests of religion, were occasions for Presbyterial intervention in the arrangements of the local church.

[15]See especially the letters of Hugh Hodge, the physician of Philadelphia, in the Hodge Letters and Papers at the Library of Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

report tie in with the Memorial? The Clerk gives us the answer:

> [104]
>
> The Minority's report is as follows (viz)
>
> Resolved 1. That it is the duty of the Church in her appropriate character, to do, through her proper officers and courts[,] all that God requires at her hands, and that for this purpose she is adequately furnished by her glorious head.
>
> Resolved 2. That the policy of conducting benevolent enterprizes by a system of Boards and permanent agencies, is unpresbyterian, unscriptural and dangerous.
>
> Resolved 3. That if it should be regarded as desirable to have central channels for the transmission of funds to distant parts, there would be nothing improper in the arrangement; provided these financial agents are men of business and officers "not spiritual in the church."

Here in what is obviously Thornwell's own language is his own capsule condensation of the entire Memorial: it is nearly all there, concise, every word loaded.

The one effect of Committee discussion would seem to be Resolution 3. We may conjecture that in Committee Thomas Smyth bore down hard on the impracticality of leaving the remittance of substantial funds to vague theories about the completeness of the Church to do her Lord's work. We can picture the compact Committee, with Thornwell and Coit a minority but on so small a Committee a substantial one. They listen to Smyth as he riducules Thornwell's ideas with all the vigor an Irishman could muster. We know, from Smyth's later expressions in print, that the positive side of Thornwell's programme struck the minister from Charleston as "perfectly chimerical"[16] and we can picture Thornwell con-

---

[16] See below, p 156.

senting to frame a third resolution alien to his preferred course but offering a compromise which might satisfy some of his opposition without giving up essential ground. Hence his "central channels for the transmission of funds to distant parts" -- this much he will concede, that funds are going to have to be sent to the ends of the earth -- and this much he will require, that those handling the money not be men diverted from an all-demanding spiritual ministry by becoming financial agents. Having read the Memorial, we are in a position to ask how far Resolution 3 in the Minority Report was in fact a concession from Thornwell's full position.

This question, though modest in form, is one which was to follow Thornwell and his interpreters for half a century and more. As we go with Thornwell to Synod at Augusta, we feel no weight of precedent upon us, no overpowering sense of deference except whatever nod we might be inclined to make towards any exceedingly bright, exceedingly certain of himself young minister-professor. But there were two roads to Augusta; the one we have just travelled with our young friend from Columbia, and the other hidden twenty-one years in the future when an older, dying Thornwell would return to this same church, to this same building, in which we can still in 1977 sit where he sat and look around at the walls which reflected his voice in 1840 and in 1861; and the second road to Augusta was to be travelled by a James Henley Thornwell who commanded the highest attention and the highest respect in the entire assemblage. What this later Thornwell said, what this later Thornwell did, would be appealed to for a full generation as the sanction and authority of a founding father.

Sitting in the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia in

1840, even having read the Memorial -- hastily, no doubt, scanning it as busy men with much else on our minds, aware that men who write are always writing; we cannot afford to linger too long over the latest bundle of sheets of paper that have been pressed on us in the name of duty and old acquaintance -- there does not seem to us to be much discrepancy. The Memorial was five sixths attack on the existing machinery, as we remember it; the positive part of the Memorial spoke only of just letting the Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods, Assembly, do their own work. No new machinery was to replace the present Boards; the courts of the church <u>are</u> the machinery Thornwell has in mind. Then there was that part about the Deacons. It was parenthetical and a little amorphous, compared with the bold, stark strictures Thornwell laid out against the Boards. Leaning over and borrowing the pages again from our friend, we leaf through to refresh ourselves, and find that what Thornwell said about Deacons was that they should handle the money, the business end of missions; and far from recommending a panel of deacons to replace the Boards, he simply said that <u>if</u> the Boards were transformed into bodies charged with purely financial and material concerns; and that <u>if</u> they were entirely subject to the directives of the church courts, in the way that a bank, so far as a man's interests entrusted to the bank are concerned, is entirely subject to the directives of the man as depositor, paying his money where and when he orders it paid, and keeping it safe and accounted for the meanwhile; and that <u>if</u> the men who did this were deacons, meaning (a) not ministers, and (b) specially set apart for this sacred material responsibility by the church, -- why <u>then</u> there would be no <u>objection</u> to them.

Thornwell, in other words, saw no necessity for central channels; but if others did, he would not make an issue of

it <u>if</u> three conditions were met: the central body should be executive only, with no independent powers; it should be bare of preachers; and it should preferably consist of deacons, certainly of business men.

Looking back now at Resolution 3 we find two of the Memorial's points; missing is the emphasis on deacons. Did Thornwell leave them out because of space, or had the use of deacons outside the local congregation drawn so much fire in the committee that he let it go for the time being? We do not know, -- not having been on the committee.

What we do know, however, is that strong as Thornwell always was in denouncing the central agencies and calling for a return to the simple Presbyterian framework of ministers and elders assembled in courts of regular gradation, he always followed the lead taken so quietly and innocently by Resolution 3 in the Minority Report from the Committee on Missions at the Synod of 1840: "if it should be regarded as desirable," and by this Thornwell meant that if by formal vote of the ministers and elders assembled it be found that it was regarded as desirable by Presbytery, Synod or General Assembly, "to have central channels for the transmission of funds," Thornwell would go along.

Those who were <u>for</u> a central agency would always be able to point to his agreement to them; those who came to agree with Thornwell that the central agencies were the whole problem, and should be gotten rid of, would always be embarrassed by his acquiescience in them. Looking back, we can see that the later larger embarrassment was latent in this first report of the minority of the Committee of the 1840 Synod of South Carolina and Georgia.

But the debate on the floor of Synod has begun, and we are carried for the moment away from the lasting records of

ink on page to the transitory speeches on the floor -- flowers of the field which however bright and appealing will soon be faded and gone past recovery. The Minutes are innocent of record of or comment on what the participants said. We know from Benjamin Morgan Palmer's reminiscences that the debate was a stiff one; that the two principal speakers were Thornwell and Smyth; and that Thornwell's naturally sarcastic temperament, not yet mellowed as twenty years of conscious discipline would mellow it, broke forth just at noon recess with sting enough to lose him, we may judge, some support in the house, though his full apology after lunch, in Palmer's account, made full amends.[17]

What the Minutes do tell us, however, is something Palmer fails to mention, and it is important.

In the opening session, we observed, visiting brethren were noted in the Minutes and made welcome to the hospitality of the Synod. Since then another visiting brother has arrived. His name is Walter Lowrie.

Walter Lowrie, like Absalom Peters of the American Home Missionary Society, and Rufus Anderson of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, was representative of the new class of practical Prelate which Thornwell's Memorial held up to studied mistrust. He was the career administrator, the permanent Secretary on whom the work depended, the man of ability and tenacity who was always in the office, always in the churches, always in the Presbyteries, always in the Synods, always at the General Assembly. Wherever you might turn, there you found the Board's Secretary, on and off

---

[17] B[enjamin] M[organ] Palmer, The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, D. D., LL. D., Late Professor of Theology in the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina, p 222.

the floor, listening, speaking, trouble-shooting; taking care of the interests of the Board.

From his standpoint he was doing what the Church had put him there to do: to conduct and promote the work of the Church through the work which the Church had committed to her Board. And in Walter Lowrie the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America had found one of the best.[18]

Two years earlier, at the age of 25, Thornwell had brought to Synod a substantial theological resolution defining or clarifying four "fundamental article[s] of the Christian faith."[19] A locality in each State making up the Synod had opposed it,[20] but Synod had adopted Thornwell's firm language as "our solemn testimony of the truths of the Gospel[; we] do pledge ourselves, that no contrary doctrine shall be taught in the Seminary, or in our pulpits[;...] as professors and ministers, we will endeavour to guard our pupils and hearers against all the heresies condemned in this testimony.[21]

---

[18]See below, pp 355-358. See also below, p 493. For the Edward L. DuPuy photograph of Walter Lowrie's portrait, see the Historical Foundation News, 30:1, March 1974, p 1. The original oil is in the Museum of The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[19]MSS Minutes of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, pp 58-61; Palmer, Life of JHT, pp 214-215.

[20]Palmer, Life of JHT, p 124.

[21]MSS Minutes of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, November 13, 1838, pp 58-61; Palmer, Life of JHT, p 215. The first article is a concise comprehensive statement of the doctrine of original sin as consisting of the imputation of Adams's guilt to all his posterity who were descended from Adam by ordinary generation, "founded solely upon the fact, that he was constituted,

At that meeting, only the Congregationally minded majority of Charleston Union Presbytery, and a few like-minded inheritors of New England traditions in Georgia, had been out of agreement with the young pastor. Now, though his earlier success may have encouraged him to be hopeful that the work of reform would be continued in his Synod, he finds a different alignment. Smyth, Gildersleeve and Howe, all three men from outside the South, who stayed with the General Assembly in 1838 when Charleston Union had bolted, are now disinclined to see Thornwell's reform as the logical continuation of the break with the voluntary societies; Smyth is the principal floor opponent, Gildersleeve is an active supporter of the existing Missions structure, and Dr. Howe is not going to be voting against the majority report.

To this is now added a factor which will continue to be the pattern in the Presbyterian Church so long as there are

---

by the sovereign appointment of God, their federal head and representative."

The second article is a concise comprehensive statement of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, so "that the obedience and death of Christ constitute the alone ground of a sinner's acceptance before God, and that 'to all those for whom Christ purchased redemption, He doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same.'"

The third article affirms the inability of the sinner, the alone effectual operation of the Holy Spirit, and the efficacious and invincible saving grace of God.

The fourth article is a compact statement of the Old School Presbyterian view of New England's New Theology: "We believe that the form of doctrine usually called Hopkinsianism, though a milder form of error than Taylorism, or Pelagianism, is inconsistent with the Presbyterian standards; and if fully carried out in its consequences and results, is utterly destructive of the fundamental principles of the Gospel."

Boards. One of the supporters of the majority report -- hitherto undiscovered correspondence might some day tell us who -- has the ultimate weapon on hand:

[ ]

> Walter Lowrie Esq. Corresponding Secretary and General Agent of the Assembly's Board of Foreign Missions being present was introduced to the Synod, and requested to offer his views upon the subject which he accordingly did.
>
> W. Lowrie having finished his remarks, a motion was made for recess ....

We have no record of what Walter Lowrie said to the Synod. We know that he was a convinced and effective believer in the work of foreign missions. His children became foreign missionaries, his grandchildren likewise. Lowrie himself had been first a United States Senator from Pennsylvania, then Clerk of the Senate. He gave up his substantial secular career to devote the rest of his life to the work of the Foreign Mission Board of his church. Within seven years his son, Walter C. Lowrie, would give his life as a missionary to China in the service of this same Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

Such a man, coming such a distance from Philadelphia to the frontier Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, would leave little doubt in the minds of his listeners that wisdom and righteousness lay in greater, not less, enthusiasm for the work of the Board he served.

It was a work of common sense for a supporter of the Board to move for recess immediately after Lowrie took his seat.

A Synod which was as much trouble to get to as a frontier Synod was in those days, was not a thing you would hurry

through with. The Minutes give us some idea of how long the friends of the majority report had available to follow up in private conversation and personal contact the work Smyth and Lowrie performed on the floor:

> [104]
>
> Half past 3 o'Clock P M
>
> Synod met....
>
> The unfinished business was taken up (viz) the motion to adopt the Major-
>
> [105]
>
> ity Report of the Committee to whom was referred the Report of the Board of Missions.
>
> After the discussion of that Report had proceeded for some time, Synod took a recess until 7 o'Clock....

And at seven o'clock, after meeting for "the religious exercises appointed," Synod adjourned "to meet on Monday morning at nine o'clock."

Sunday would be full, but not of parliamentary business.

> [105, continued]
>
> Monday Morning 9 o'Clock
>
> Synod met and was opened with prayer. Present as on Saturday, together with the Rev Rich[d] M. Baker, who was reported to have been ordained on yesterday morning by Hopewell Presbytery....

By then Synod was ready to hear the recommendations of its Committee on the application for the setting off of a Florida Presbytery, and to approve it;[22] to elect directors

---

[22] MSS Minutes of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, November 1840, p 105.

of the Theological Seminary in Columbia;[23] to commend the American Bible Society to its Presbyteries and people;[24] to discuss and adopt a series of resolutions in support of the General Assembly's Board of Education, its agent in the Southern Synods, Professor Sparrow, and an offering in the Board's behalf;[25] to hear the Report of the Trustees of Oglethorpe University and refer it to a special committee of five;[26] to hear the result of the elections to the Seminary Board:

> [p 107]
> The Committee to receive and count the votes for Directors of the Seminary reported the following members as duly elected, viz, Ministers, W. A. McDowell D.D. B Gildersleeve, S. S. Davis, A. Church D.D. T. Smyth and D. Humphreys Laymen, Wm Dearing, E. A. Nisbet, B. King & Dr. T. Wells.[27]

It is clear that our Synod of South Carolina and Georgia is no exception to her sister synods and presbyteries: her business is concrete, and it revolves around Boards and institutions. No matter what is said in debate, the practical effect of the unfolding docket is to create a psychological feeling that these institutions, these Boards, are the Synod; or at least, Synod's excuse for existence. They appear in form as dependents, but just as it is easy for parents to feel that the real reason for their existence and the home's existence is the children no matter how dependent,

---

[23] The same, p 106.

[24] The same.

[25] The same, pp 106-107.

[26] The same, p 107.

[27] The same.

so a similar feeling about its agencies can pervade a Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly.

We know, having read the full text of the Memorial, that Thornwell fully realizes this. It is part of his grounds for complaint, that the courts of the church are in practice reduced to being the auxiliaries of the Boards -- mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, till discussion of the question itself can take place only under the psychological handicap of seeming to attack the main business of the court and its primary reason for existence.

Now, at last, the scheduled matters are at a lull, and Synod can proceed to what in Thornwell's mind should have been its primary business all along, its number one docket priority -- careful consideration of first principles.

No one who makes attendance on Presbytery and Synod a fixed habit of existence will need a quotation from the Minutes to know what happened next.

Synod took up Dr. Palmer's letter from the table -- he had asked for a clarification of his relationship to Synod since the confusions of 1838 and the defection of Charleston Union Presbytery. Everyone knew Dr. Palmer; his relationship was clear; Synod referred his letter to a three-member committee to think about it and make a report.

At last,

> The unfinished business of Saturday was taken up, viz, the Report of the Committee [on Missions,] but the discussion was deferred until 3 o'Clock this afternoon.

The purist and theoretician among us, if he has not thrown down this whole procrastinating narrative in exasperation already, will be tempted to object to the presentation,

over a period of several pages, of material that seems so extraneous to the one point we are interested in: what did the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia do with the majority and minority reports it had before it, the first a standard endorsement of the missionary work and structures already in business for the General Assembly, the second a minority call for scrapping all present structures and taking a new approach from the ground up?

But this apparently extraneous material is essential to our understanding of a vital point: no true mental picture of the debate on mission administration in the Presbyterian Church of this age, or, really, of any age, can be gotten in the absence of some feel for the circumstances of the debate itself.

To pick up a book and read -- set out, isolated and pat, -- the arguments, the rebuttal, the article rebutting the rebuttal, the editor's footnote on the article, is to absorb unconsciously the notion that the whole thing took place in a book; perhaps only in a dissertation. Any such notion concerning the debate we are interested in is doubly pernicious. The topic for debate was whether <u>these</u> Boards which came before <u>these</u> church courts in <u>this</u> way could or could not do a better job, should or should not do the job at all, compared with <u>these</u> courts administering mission work directly <u>themselves</u> -- carrying on their business in <u>this</u> kind of meeting with <u>this</u> set of habits and procedures.

It was indeed the debater's task to range far afield, to go to the theoretical roots of the matter, to unmask the true nature of the operations at stake, their appearance and their reality; but all the while he was debating, he was debating

before men who were sitting in this church court with him while it ground through this present business, on this present arrangement, in this present efficiency. With one ear, and but once, they heard his arguments; all the rest of their formal ecclesiastical lives their attention was tied up in sessions like the ones we have been inching through, the 1840 sessions of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia.

Sparing ourselves, however, another whole legal-sized sheet of paper inscribed in a tiny hand with the details of the other things Synod grinds past on the way to its decision on the classic summary of the classic Memorial, we come at last, truly at last, to a Presbyterian proposal (moved, one may guess, by a friend of the minority report who would like to see the subject debated without Walter Lowrie in the building; or moved, it may be, by Synod's perennial member who deprecates division and hopes for some compromise to appear if enough time can be found for working one up) -- and to an equally Presbyterian action:

> First,
>
> [109]
> The unfinished business, viz, the adoption of the Majority's report was then taken up and discussed.
>
> Then,
>
> It was then moved that the subject be postponed to the next meeting of Synod, which was decided in the negative.
>
> And finally,
>
> The question recurring on the motion to adopt the report of the majority of the Committee, on the Report of the Board of Foreign Missions, it was decided by Ayes and Nays as follows, viz-

Ayes Ministers, Humphreys, Priest, Cater, McKittrick, Hoyt, Church, Talmage, Bowman, Safford, A. N. Cunningham, Petrie, Reid, Brown, Pearson, Peden, H. B. Cunningham, McDowell, Gildersleeve, Howe, Smyth, Baird, Winn, Burroughs, Patterson, J.S. Wilson, Dickson, Chamberlain, Davies, S.B.O. Wilson, Caldwell, Boggs, Douglas, S. S. Davis, W. H. Davis and Cassels Elders Boozer, Norris, Evans, Bull, Dearing, Shear, King, Chiles, Burns, W.E. James, White, J.T. James, McCarley, Wiley, Ardis and Gillam 53

Nays Ministers Ketchum, McQueen, Coit, Auld, Thornwell and Bishop Elder Martin -- 7.

Excused from voting, English, Donnelly. Elders Douglas Crawford, Hindman

Now we know where we are.

The presbyters have debated, they have told each other what they think the Spirit is saying to the churches; and they have taken a vote.

Ketchum, McQueen, Coit, Auld, Thornwell and Bishop; and one ruling elder: Mr. Martin, from Thornwell's church in Columbia. This is the "respectable minority" Thornwell will remember with thanks, even though it is far from the overwhelming strength found on the other side.

Young Professor Thornwell, who only this month has been elected to rejoin the faculty of the college he left with first honors six years ago, and left again a year ago to reenter the pastorate, has found that it is easier to promote sound theology in the mid-South of the early 19th Century than it is to lay an axe to the root there of going institutions.

He has a church to get back to; and, looking across the years and knowing now what as we leave Synod we have yet to find out, we gather that J. C. Coit has simply had enough for a while.

P. W. Junkin, Mr. Thornwell, Mr. Coit and Mr. Martin obtained leave of absence. Synod then adjourned to meet tomorrow morning at 9 o'Clock.

Concluded with prayer.[28]

As he makes his way to Columbia, Thornwell carries his classic manuscript with him. It was obviously before its time at Synod; but he thinks he knows somebody who is ready for it and might be interested enough to print it.

---

[28]Succeeding sessions of this meeting of the Synod saw numerous further actions endorsing various aspects of the work of the Boards of the General Assembly, commending actions and resolutions of the General Assembly touching the causes of the Boards and the special offerings to be taken up for them. See the MSS Minutes of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, November 1840, pp 110-116.

The handwritten Minutes were duly carried to the General Assembly of 1841, found in order, and bear the certifying autograph of its moderator:

Ro. J. Breckinridge

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

When James Henley Thornwell was eight years old, he stood with his mother by his Father's bedside and watched him die, a man in the prime of life.

> After he was laid out[, a boyhood friend recalled], James and myself looked wonderingly on his remains, and then went out to the spring, talking, as boys might do, of the strangeness of death. I recollect his saying, in almost heart-broken accents, "What will mother do? What will become of us?"
>
> We remained some time at the spring; he often weeping bitterly, and I consoling him as well as I could. No day of my life is more vividly impressed upon my memory.[1]

Mrs. Thornwell, a Baptist of old Welsh stock, was hard put to it; but by counting every penny and taking in sewing, scraping the bottom of the barrel hourly, she managed to secure for her two sons the rudiments of a primary education. Her husband, "described as generous in disposition, free-handed and hospitable," enviable traits in a man, was also described as "living always up to his means, and accumulating nothing."[2] She earned the eternal gratitude of her child-

---

[1]Palmer, Life of JHT, p4.

[2]The same, p 3.

ren, and lived to see her daughters happily married, her lawyer son well established, and her eldest the ornament of his State, seated in easy concourse with the powerful, the wealthy and the mighty. He at last would resign the highest academic honors the State possessed to take up what he considered an even more important work, the professorship of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary.

His path from an orphan's tears to the scholar's crown makes one of the more moving stories in American history. There is a dream-like quality about it, the stuff of which stage and screen are made. The young orphan, kept in simple school by a mother determined that her children not lack an education, is so apt that his schoolmaster, called to serve as tutor on the Pegues plantation, persuades Mr. Pegues to give the boy haven to match the schoolmaster's teaching him free of charge. The family doctor, making his rounds, finds the small Thornwell, pale, pinched, unprepossessing, outdoors reading a book obviously beyond him -- Hume's History of England. A Virginia gentleman and something of a josher, the Doctor advises the little boy to "read something he could understand."

> Instantly the book was in his hands, with a challenge for examination upon its contents....The examination was begun and protracted, with a growing wonder....[3]

Dr. Graves knows intellectual prodigy when he sees it; and through his intermediation the wealthy General James Gillespie and the impecunious but energetic young lawyer, William H. Robbins, become interested in the boy.

Robbins, New Englander fled for his health to warmer

---

[3]The same, p 20. The account above is based on the material furnished by Palmer in Life of JHT, Chapter 2, pp 13-26.

shores, has been frozen out of North Carolina but welcomed in South Carolina. He is just beginning his law practice in Cheraw. With the patience and affection of an older brother, and the steadiness of a father, Robbins takes the boy into his own home, and into his own small room. Here, in the nights as sleep comes but fitfully to the young and lonely, the older man brings stability and assurance to his little friend; and here, unknown to both, the tuberculosis which drove Robbins from Maine and Massachusetts and finally took his life altogether, finds a new home in the frame of the lad he had befriended.[4]

Thornwell, when the time came for him to build on his college foundation -- he stood first in his class from the day when under General Gillespie's financial support he was enrolled as a Sophomore by examination -- searched out instruction in Hebrew. He went north to Andover but without staying there went on to Harvard,[5] where he found it, and

---

[4]The clues are all there in Palmer's Life of Thornwell; but Palmer wrote before Pasteur had done his work. So far as the writer can discover, no one has previously noted the ironic double gift of life and death, made by William H. Robbins to his protege James Henley Thornwell.

[5]The frequent statements that Thornwell studied at Andover are incorrect. The original letters in which he tells how he departed Andover without waiting for term time and enrollment, having discovered in his summer visit that Andover had nothing to offer that was not available in South Carolina, are in the Thornwell Collection in the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina. They are fairly excerpted by Palmer, who quotes among other passages this one:

> "I have left [Andover] for good....1. Nothing is taught there which is not taught equally well at Columbia. 2. The Theology taught there is such as I cannot countenance; it is awfully New School. 3.

German as well, preparing himself for the Senior class the next year in Columbia Theological Seminary.

A full year in the north for Thornwell, however, was not to be. The disease was already at work on his lungs, and the Cambridge winter accelerated its progress. Thornwell's Harvard letters are delightful reflections of New England, of Harvard, and of his own mind, but before long we find him writing to Alexander H. Pegues,

> On the morning of the 4th of October, I shall set sail for Charleston, and shall be in Cheraw about the 20th or 21st. I regret very much to leave Harvard; but I am compelled to do so. I am delightfully situated here; and should be exceedingly happy, under other circumstances, to spend two or three years.
>
> A physician of Boston has assured me that it would be certain death for me to try a Northern winter; and I have already suffered nearly as much from the cold, as I ever did in South Carolina. The climate, for the past two weeks, has been very variable; sometimes very piercing, and sometimes pleasant.
>
> I have consequently determined not to risk[6] my health, but to return as early as I safely can.

Now time has gone by. Thornwell has served effectively as a pastor, been called to the faculty of the South Carolina College, has proved an able, effective and popular teacher; has returned to the pastorate; and is soon -- January 1st,

---

> The habits of the people are disagreeable to me. 4. I have no idea of settling in this country. No money could induce me to do it." (Palmer, Life of JHT, pp 115-116.)

[6] J[ames] H[enley] Thornwell from Cambridge to Alexander H. Pegues in South Carolina, October 1, 1834, as carried in Palmer, Life of JHT, p 126. The original is in the South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina.

1841 -- to return to the College again, as professor and college chaplain. As we have seen, he has taken his responsibilities as a Presbyter seriously. An intensive worker, he burns the midnight oil to dawn and, so his contemporaries tell us, invents many an ingenious argument in playful banter "to prove that the day was intended for rest, and the night for work; and that man, in his perverseness, had wrongfully changed the original and proper arrangement of Providence."[7]

This is the James Henley Thornwell whom we saw obtaining leave of absence to depart the remaining sessions of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia at the end of November 1840 once the fate of his proposals on mission administration had been decided. He is a scholar's scholar, a teacher born to the calling, a pastor held in high affection, and a preacher of uncommon power.[8] We know what he knows, that he

---

[7]Palmer, Life of JHT, p 23.

[8]Even from his earliest days in the pastorate, Thornwell's preaching was the furthest removed from the dry and scholastic -- a surprise to all who knew his acadamic powers. The report is at first hand: "intensely practical and plain, nothing abstract. His sermons created great enthusiasm among the people of all denominations, who crowded into the little church until it overflowed." (Palmer, Life, p 130)

On June 20th, 1870, the Reverend R. B. Anderson would write from Yorkville to John B[ailey] Adger:

> I venture to relate one circumstance given me by Dr. D[unlap] with reference to Dr. T's early preaching.
>
> On a communion occasion at the old Waxhaw Church in Lancaster, which was his first charge, he was preaching at eleven oclock on the Sabbath from the text "This is a faithful saying["] &c --
>
> When after speaking for an hour & a half he

has a classic statement in his pocket against the Boards of the church.

We know something else that he knows: that he has a wasting in his lungs that would have killed him in one winter at Cambridge, but which has slowed down its pace in the milder winters of his native state.

This is the Thornwell who writes to Robert J. Breckinridge,

> You will probably hear exaggerated accounts of the discussion in our Synod on the subject of Boards and Agencies. For your February number, I intend to send you a document which I have carefully prepared upon this subject, and which has received the sanction of a very respectable minority among us.
>
> I would have sent it to you before, but affliction in my family, combined with other circumstances which it is useless to mention, prevented me from complying with

---

> looked at his watch & discovering the length of time consumed, he intimated his intention to close. But --- there was a simultaneous rising by many all over the congregation who called to him to go on.
>
> And he did go on for an hour longer to the great delight of every one.
>
> On going home Dr. Dunlap's father, then a very old man, said "Well (addressing his son) I never expected to hear the gospel in all its fullness (or -- the whole gospel) in a single sermon but I have heard it today & now I am ready to go" meaning to die. (MSS, Thornwell Collection, The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.)

For an account of Thornwell's preaching as seen by students, see below, pp 411-418. For an account of his preaching in New York at the peak of his powers, see below, p 420.

the promise which I made in Philadelphia.

Your sincere friend and Christian brother,

J. H. Thornwell[9]

The seventeenth of December is only a little more than two weeks after the adjournment of the Synod at Augusta, and January 1st, 1841, is hardly two weeks later than that. As South Carolina College opened after the Christmas holidays, Professor Thornwell was at his post. The term was barely under way when it became clear to his family and the College authorities, as it was clear to Thornwell, that things were not well with him at all.

The trouble was not the great weakness he felt, though that was bad enough.

It was the hemorrhages.[10]

Was their tentative onset, a few drops of blood before the flood, among the "other circumstances" which had held him

---

[9]J[ames] H[enley] Thornwell in Columbia to Robert J[efferson] Breckinridge in Baltimore, December 17, 1840, as carried in Palmer, Life of JHT, p 223. The original is in the Breckinridge Family Papers, Library of Congress.

[10]"Great prostration and several hemorrhages gave tokens of that wasting consumption, which so often falls as an early blight on the most promising and useful lives." (Palmer, Life of JHT, p 157)

Inhabitants of an era or period ravaged by any of the classic diseases do not need the resources of modern medicine to make an accurate diagnosis of their terminal symptoms. For an illustration, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, p 147. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

up for two weeks in writing to Breckinridge after Synod, to promise to send the paper on Church Boards to him for his Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine.

By the end of January he is writing to Breckinridge again, this time enclosing the document:

Columbia, January 27, 1841

Rev. and Dear Sir,

I have detained my manuscript in my hands much longer that I had any idea of doing, when I wrote to you before. My object in the delay has been to copy it; but day after day has passed over, and I have been so constantly occupied that I have had no time for the drudgery of rewriting it. I send it to you, therefore, with all the imperfections of a first draft....

My object in publishing it is not to gain a point, but to elicit discussion.[11]

At this point Thornwell expresses himself more sharply on the subject of Boards than at any other point in the pages from his pen which have come down to us, and he does so in two respects.

First, he says that the Boards "are founded upon a radical misconception of the true nature and extent of ecclesiastical power; and they can only be defended by running into the principle against which the Reformers protested, and for which the Oxford divines are now zealously contending;" and he thinks that this is a vital point which should have been expanded and enlarged on in his article.[12]

---

[11] J[ames] H[enley] Thornwell from Columbia to Robert J[efferson] Breckinridge in Baltimore, January 27, 1841. MSS in the Breckinridge Family Papers, Library of Congress. Printed in Palmer, Life of JHT, p 223.

[12] The same.

This is why he looks ahead with the eye of prophecy to the Boards as they will unfold to full strength from their present newborn condition:

> I believe that the Boards will eventually prove our masters, unless they are crushed in their infancy.[13]

This is Thornwell the seer, so accurate a prophet that to read him is to receive the uncanny feeling that he looked to the future not through a crystal ball, but plain and direct, with no intervening mist. It is also Thornwell the realist. His language is brutal. He sees the Boards as monsters no longer in embryo but fresh hatched, bound by their nature to destroy the Church as surely as the excrescences of the medieval church destroyed the church of the apostles. He would wipe them out not as a nuisance, as men drown kittens, but as a pestilence, as men sterilize instruments in the operating room, the heart of the hospital whose mission is to save life, not infect it with death.

The second respect in which Thornwell puts his written views unusually sharply in this letter of late January, 1841, is on the topic of the Boards' angry opposition to dissent. We may gather that the members of the Synod did not confine themselves to voting against Thornwell's minority report, but that on the floor and off it, and perhaps in correspondence

---

[13]The same. A. A. Markley III in conducting a study of Thornwell's views on Boards for the Ad Interim Committee on Restructure of Boards and Agencies, General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, picked this phrase up and placed it near the close of his summary in a position of prominence. (MSS, XTMSS, in the Ad Interim Committee on Restructure of Boards and Agencies Collection, the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.)

and in other ways, they had come down heavily on the would-be reformer and his allies.

> There is a fact connected with the influence of the Boards[, Thornwell observes], that speaks volumes against them. A few men in the Church have presumed to question the wisdom of their organization. These men are met with a universal cry of denunciation from all parts of the land. If, in their infancy, they (the Boards) can thus brow-beat discussion, what may we not expect from them in the maturity of manhood?[14]

Here Thornwell is touching on one of the facts of life where Boards are concerned. They did not then welcome critical discussion of their affairs, let alone of their existence, and they never have; they did not hesitate then to brow-beat discussion, and they never have.[15] Again, Thornwell looks to the future with a singularly unclouded eye.

But this is, after all, only prophecy. Thornwell has more to say about the actual present state of things.

> It is not to be disguised [Thornwell continues to Breckinridge,] that our Church is becoming deplorably secular. She has degenerated from a spiritual body into a mere petty corporation. When we meet in our ecclesiastical courts, instead of attending to the spiritual interests of God's kingdom, we scarcely do anything more than examine and audit accounts, and devise ways and means for raising money. We are doing God's work by

---

[14] J[ames] H[enley] Thornwell from Columbia to Robert J[efferson] Breckinridge in Baltimore, January 27, 1841. MSS in the Breckinridge Family Papers, Library of Congress. Printed in Palmer, Life of JHT, p 224.

[15] For examples of developments confirming the accuracy of Thornwell's predictive insight, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, pp 148-149. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

> human wisdom and human policy; and what renders the evil still more alarming, is that so few are awake to the real state of of the case.
>
> Your Magazine is the only paper in the Church that can be called a faithful witness for the truth. I do sincerely and heartily thank God for the large measure of grace which He has bestowed upon you. I regard the principles which you advocate of so much importance, that I could make any sacrifice of comfort or of means, consistent with other obligations, to aid and support you.[16]

Breckinridge, to Thornwell, is still very much the senior and leader. Thornwell moves on from the Boards by thanking the Baltimore pastor for his prayers for his younger colleague in the "arduous and trying" field of labor in the College, where Thornwell already senses that he has control of the situation. He knows that he has that moral influence over the students which was to be so pronounced through the rest of his life. Thornwell's prayer-meeting and Bible classs with the students, a part of his work as a professor, are "interesting." "My sermons on Sunday are very seriously listened to; and I have succeeded in awakening a strong interest in the evidence of our religion."[17] An unsympathetic modern critic of Thornwell's has taken him to task for his frank self-assessments; but we have it on independent authority that Thornwell, ever open and unshielded to those close to him by ties of affection or common commitment, was in these matters by no means thinking more highly of himself than he ought to have thought.[18] It was a time when college

---

[16] J[ames] H[enley] Thornwell from Columbia to Robert J[efferson] Breckinridge in Baltimore, January 27, 1841. MSS in the Breckinridge Family Papers, Library of Congress. Printed in Palmer, Life of JHT, p 224.

[17] The same.

[18] See below, pp 411-418; see also below, p 420.

presidents and faculties were pushed to the wall by turbulent student bodies; more than one president was forced out of office in disgrace because of faculty and student rebellion.[19] The young teacher who could command respect from the most independent sons of the most independent families in what was to prove the most independent of States would have been a fool not to know whether or not he was on top of his responsibilities; and a most telling measure of a friendship is the amount of fact a man can pass on to his friend.

So the draft of a Memorial to the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia made its way to Baltimore, along with additional sharp observations from its author. Editor Breckinridge saw that it was duly set up in type. It appeared in the April issue, unsigned as was the custom of the day. We have already read it, while we were at Synod; and Thornwell was in no position to pore over the look of it in print himself. His life being in increasing danger, his physicians prescribed a sea voyage as absolutely necessary for his recovery.[20]

Thornwell's travel letters to Nancy Witherspoon Thornwell are a delight, as is his shipboard journal of this his first European trip. But while the letters were not to see

---

[19]For an account of how this happened at the South Carolina College itself, see Maximilian LaBorde, History of the South Carolina College, pp 410-419.

At a sister institution, George Frederick Holmes, the scribe and scholar of Pleasant Gardens, Virginia, correspondent with Thornwell and Le Comte and numerous other worthies, was fired in absentia from the Presidency of what is now the University of Mississippi, for his failure to keep simple order on the campus.

[20]Palmer, Life of JHT, p 157.

the light of public gaze for thirty-five years, the pages of The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine devoted to his "desire to elicit discussion" were before the public even before he sailed, fulfilling their purpose.

They were read, in fact, by the ailing Irishman from Charleston, Thomas Smyth, who had not liked what he learned of them in Augusta and who did not propose to let the opportunity for further attack on them go by.

If what Thornwell wanted was discussion, Smyth was ready to let him have it.

THOMAS SMYTH MAKES A SERIOUS REVIEW

"Thomas Smyth," wrote America's greatest living expert on the subject, "was a moderate in an age of extremes."[1] This is an interesting evaluation of a man whose reputation as pastor and bookman[2] is roundly and fairly eclipsed by his fame as a controversialist. The truth of the aphorism lies in the definition of the word "moderate." Smyth's positions can often be shown to be midway between more extreme positions. On slavery, for example, he was attacked by the abolitionists because he was not for immediate unconditional emancipation, while he was attacked by the ultra slave interests of his adopted South for his position (with Thornwell) that the Negro was a human being, and for his position that in the long run the slave should be prepared for freedom and become free.[3]

---

[1] [Thomas] Erskine Clarke, "Thomas Smyth : 1808-1873, A Brief Biography," in The Historical Foundation News, 27:1, January 1971, pp 1-3.

[2] Smyth's library was justly his pride. See T. Watson Street, "Thomas Smyth, Presbyterian Bookman," pp 1-14 in the Journal of Presbyterian History, XXXVII:3, March 1959.

[3] For the best and fullest modern treatment of Smyth, see Thomas Erskine Clarke's dissertation, Thomas Smyth:

If by "moderate" we mean, however, some moderation in the warmth, frequency or length of the expression of our opinions, Smyth would by Clarke or any other judge have to be classified as immoderate -- perhaps even in the extreme.

Smyth had administered what he saw as a well-deserved defeat on the floor of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia to the views of those who seemed bent on dismantling the structures which had brought the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America whatever success she may have had in the modern missionary enterprise. We can imagine how exasperated he was, on opening his April, 1841, issue of The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine and finding in it the complete text of the paper underlying Thornwell and Coit's minority report at Synod. With pen in hand he was soon at work making a full answer.

Moderate of the Old South, Union Theological Seminary, Virginia, 1970.

For the fullest Smyth bibliography, consult the materials provided in Clarke's dissertation. The two printed works most usually available are [Thomas Smyth,] Complete Works of Rev. Thomas Smyth, D.D., Edited by Rev. Prof. J. Wm. Flinn, D.D. [in ten volumes], and Thomas Smyth, Autobiographical Notes, Letters and Reflections, Edited by his Granddaughter Louisa Cheves Stoney.

There is a comprehensive collection of Smyth manuscript material, made over a lifetime by Smyth himself, at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina, containing correspondence with a large circle of friends, acquaintances, and worthies, throwing light on many topics of interest in the period. This is the indispensable collection of manuscript sources related to Smyth.

Letters from Smyth to a large number of other people are scattered through repositories in North America and the British Isles and would repay a systematic program to locate and collect them by transcription or facsimile.

Breckinridge, we suspect, was the author of the title to Thornwell's classic paper on Presbyterian Church Boards as it appeared in print, "A Calm Discussion of the Lawfulness, Scripturalness, and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Boards." Thornwell does not appear to have mentioned any title beyond "memorial" in his letters to Breckinridge, and the style of the title fails somewhat of coming up to the direct crisp style of the text. In reply to the ex-memorial, now a Calm Discussion, Smyth supplied Breckinridge with manuscript copy enough to gladden the heart of any editor on the lookout for material to fill a book a year with small type.

In October of 1841 the first of a three-part written defense of the Boards by Smyth was in the magazine and off the press.

Smyth, we see by the defense, is not to be outdone. If his opponents are Calm, he is Serious. If they speak in generalities of Ecclesiastical Boards, he will defend those of the Presbyterian Church. "A Serious Review of 'A Calm Discussion of the Lawfulness, Scripturalness, and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Boards' --- Being a Defense of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church" is his title. The exposure of Thornwell and Breckinridge as extremists is his opening move. As he says,

> The tendency of the human mind is to extremes. Man, by his fall, lost that perfection of wisdom, which would ever have preserved him in the middle path, safe from the dangers of latitudianarianism, on the one hand, and of ultraism on the other. As it is, we find the human mind like the pendulum perpetually verging from one extreme to the other.[4]

---

[4]Thomas Smyth, "A serious Review of 'A Calm Discussion of the Lawfulness, Scripturalness, and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Boards' --- Being a Defence of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church," in The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, VII:10, October 1841, p 457.

Whatever our estimate of Smyth as a moderate, he himself holds the moderate up for admiration. The unfortunate tendency to overreaction from one extreme to another holds the key, Smyth suggests, to the appearance of this new and unfortunate position:

> So has it been in the recent controversies in which our church has been so warmly engaged. The truth of God as it is contained in the doctrines of his word, and the purity of those ordinances which have been established in his church, have been both assailed, and both triumphantly defended. And as the power, with which such opposing views were advocated, has been great, and is still threatening us with a renewed assault[, s]o has it called forth a fiercer and more determined resistance. Every position occupied by the enemy has been reconnoitered, and every possible force brought to bear against them. It is unavoidably necessary that in such an attitude and in spirit of hostility, we should be disposed to entrench ourselves on the most opposite grounds.
>
> That there should, therefore, be manifested in some quarters both as it regards doctrine and practice, a tendency towards extremes, every reasonable mind must have confidently anticipated. Such a tendency we must regard as the result of that internal pressure by which the spiritual machinery of our church was impelled when the heavy sea burst upon her, and threatened to impede her onward progress; and which after the storm has subsided, carries her forward with accelerated speed.
>
> Viewing it, therefore, as in itself good, and as meaning only good to the church, there is no occasion for trembling or alarm. Our present duty evidently is to look out calmly upon the present and the future, to make an accurate calculation of our present bearings, to adjust and trim our sails, and in a confident reliance upon the propitious gales of heaven, to press forward in the glorious course before us.[5]

If this be not the voice of an unruffled moderate, where may one be heard?

---

[5]The same, pp 457-458. Paragraphing supplied.

Smyth is distressed, however, that this tendency to extremism has shown itself particularly in respect to the structures of the church, now "regarded by some with feelings of jealously and distrust."[6] It is right, he says, to reject

> with conscientious reprobation, the arbitrary assumptions of those who would enslave the church to the despotism of merely voluntary associations, originated and controlled by men beyond the church, and irresponsible to it, and subject to no immediate and direct control of the church.[7]

But this is one thing. It is quite another to deny "to the church the power of framing such organizations for herself, and denouncing those she has instituted as anti-Presbyterianism, and dangerous."[8]

Here, it can be said, Smyth has put succinctly the description of the division of opinion which appeared in the Old School branch of the Presbyterian Church in the United States after that body had settled definitively in 1837-1838 her separation from the major voluntary organizations and her endorsement of the principle that the church as church must carry out the benevolent responsibilities inherent in her commission from her Master. Prior to the disruption the issue was between Boards neither created by the Church nor responsible to the Church, and Boards created by the Church and responsible to her. The issue now has become the right, or lack of right, of the Church to frame such organizations as Boards for herself at all.

It has been observed that during this general period in

---

[6]The same, p 458.

[7]The same.

[8]The same.

American church life there may be discerned a general movement which has been summed up by the name of a churchly resurgence.[9] We have noted briefly that in the literature this is frequently tied in to the antithetical concepts of "high" churchmanship and "low" churchmanship in the sense of an emphasis on churchly rather than more flexible channels and categories (in the case of the high); and of more relaxed and undemanding relationships to the rigidities of churchmanship and denominational prerogatives, rather than a strict insistence on formal church authority (in the case of the low).[10]

It is appropriate at this point to plant a seed in the reader's mind. As Smyth puts the issue it is on the limitation of the power of the church; and the position he supports is that the church is not limited in this respect, that she does have power to frame organizations for herself.

Viewed in the context of a struggle with the Voluntary Societies, this assertion of a power of the church, coupled with a denial of the right (or at least the propriety) of erecting missionary structures outside the church, is properly analyzed as a "high-church" tendency. It places authority and power within the formal denominational structure; and in the context of the struggle with the Voluntary Societies, it localizes the churchly power in the General Assembly.

Accepting Smyth's definition of the new issue within the Old School branch of the Presbyterian church means, however, that in the new context of the two decades between the Presbyterian disruption and the national disruption, Thornwell and

---

[9] See above, p 14.

[10] See above, p 15.

the anti-Board agitators are not arguing for an increase in centralized denominational power and authority, they are trying to cut it down to smaller size. They are concentrating their fire against the authority and power of the centralized General Assembly to do certain things in certain ways.

We shall be brought back to this distinction at the rhetorical climax of the debate as it rang out twenty years later to the galleries in the General Assembly of 1860. An understanding of this clear and accurate definition of the issue by Smyth will make illumination of the analysis of the rhetoric of 1860 much easier.[11] It will be suggested then, as it may be suspected now, that considering Thornwell to be a part of the "high-churchly" resurgence may be at least misleading, and possibly mistaken.

Thomas Smyth's long Review appeared in three parts, placed in three issues of Breckinridge's magazine. As he indicates in his own heads for the three installments, his argument follows three principal lines: first, that ecclesiastical Boards are necessary; second, that they are sanctioned by the standards of the Presbyterian Church and therefore constitutional; and third, that they are scriptural.

To gain maximum effect on two counts, Smyth begins with the practical argument and ends with the Scriptural argument. This gives him a double advantage in debate. The difficulties inherent in scrapping a going institution are compelling and obvious. Many, perhaps most, listeners and readers will be won permanently by a simple comparison of the glories of the present missionary system with the untried, undeveloped

---

[11] See below, p 528.

vapors of the new. After this, he can finish on a high, spiritual, Scriptural note. The mind first wooed by the practical force of expediency can make peace with conscience in contemplation of a scriptural warrant for it.

We may expand the above synopsis of Smyth's argument as follows, illustrating our analysis by brief exhibits of his own words:

> 1. Ecclesiastical Boards [are] necessary, and the proposed scheme offered by the objectors [is] altogether untenable and insufficient.[12]

First, the objections are novel. If so, the presumption is strong against them. Would the Church, so intent on this very battle, have failed to see these objections long ago if there had been anything to them?

Second, "[t]hese objectors admit with us the absolute necessity of accomplishing that work which these boards and agencies are designed to perform." If the work is necessary, argues Smyth, the objectors have a double burden: they must show that the existing machinery can lead, has led, and must lead to crippling evils. And -- here Smyth makes a quantum jump --

> They must further provide a system of means by which the end, [---] which, as they allow, MUST BE ATTAINED --- can be accomplished.[13]

---

[12] Smyth, "Serious Review," p 457.

[13] The same, p 460. This argument of Smyth's comes under the head of the Best-in-Field Fallacy, which is founded on the observation that a bad case falls of its own bad weight, regardless of how far from constructing the

This system of theirs, they must show, is free from all similar difficulties and objections --- is not liable to similar abuses --- and is in itself Scriptural, Presbyterian, and expedient. All this our objectors are under obligations to do before they can fairly call upon us to abandon the existing system, and to endanger our end of such necessary and transcendant importance.

If, then, such objectors either propose no substitute whatever for our present system, or one which is of doubtful expediency, it most clearly follows that all their objections, however plausible, fall to the ground --- that our present system is to be necessarily retained --- and that our church, in abandoning it, would be recreant to duty, and justly chargeable with folly. She would leave her ships and disarm her forces because

---

good case our knowledge of the evidence may still leave us.

In the same way, an insupportable and untenable theory is made no better by the existence of ten, or a hundred, or a thousand, or ten thousand, or ten million even more untenable and less supportable theories. It still remains insupportable and untenable.

We may say that Thornwell's failure to propose a better machinery than the Boards would be no argument for Presbyterian retention of the Boards <u>if</u> the Boards are in fact, as their opponents contended, mistaken and destructive excrescences upon the Presbyterian system. Is your thumb found to be riddled with cancer? If you have any sense at all, you have it cut off. It makes no difference whether or not the surgeon has yet devised what in your mind is a suitable substitute for a thumb, able to do the work of a thumb as well as or better than the original article.

This was Thornwell's view of the Boards. He believed that he had a better thumb to propose; but better or not, the malignant organ (in Thornwell's view) had to go.

The best modern account of the Best-In-Field Fallacy, which was still formally unidentified in Smyth's day, is found in Norman Macbeth, <u>Darwin Retried</u>.

> chargeable with some deficiencies, and that, too, while the enemy was in sight, and she was under positive command to put forth to sea and war a good warfare against the powers of darkness.[14]

This is the argument which has always been the most persuasive in defense of the Board system. Its power stems from the fact that it is a magnificent example of the Best-in-Field Fallacy, the fallacy whose power of attraction is remarkable even when the mind knows it for what it is. "It is incumbent upon [the objector to our General Assembly Boards] to give us some system which will meet all the difficulties of the case, and failing to do this, we are left to conclude that all his objections are vain."[15]

Everything depends on whether or not the objection is fatal. If you criticize my umbrella as being a fatal appliance for use in jumping out of airplanes, I may reply that your recommended alternative (a pogo stick) is no good. But if I conclude that until you come up with something better I may wisely rely on my umbrella and jump, my future is likely to have lumps in it.

> The very fact...that while the necessity of this duty is admitted on the one hand --- he utterly fails to provide a system adequate to the wants of the case --- is conclusive evidence against him.[16]

So, invalid and fallacious though it was and will forever remain, Thomas Smyth of Charleston has singled out, at the very beginning, what has proved historically to be the most <u>effective</u> argument to be brought in defense of the

---

[14]The same. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[15]The same.

[16]The same.

Boards throughout the debate, both then and later. It has in fact won the hearts and the votes of Presbyterians from that day to this. In addition to negating all criticisms of the Boards, whatever they may be, on the grounds that in themselves as criticisms they are irrelevant in the absence of a better alternative, by this approach Smyth also shifts his argument from the defensive to the offensive. A few minutes' consideration of what the Boards are doing will make an unwary opponent very uneasy indeed who has no large blueprint in his brief case by way of alternative.

> Let any one for a moment consider the details implied in the prosecution of this entire work --- the extent of the field to be overlooked and accurately surveyed --- the number of the ministers to be sent forth --- the number of candidates to be brought forward --- the incalculable difficulties connected with their preparation, the sending forth, the locating, and the supervision of these labourers in the vineyard --- the indisposition of our churches to exercise liberality, and yet the absolute necessity of an unfailing supply of means --- the wisdom, prudence, and toil, involved in the management and outlay of the funds --- and the daily and hourly demands which are made upon the church by these innumerable calls from all quarters for immediate direction, assistance and cooperation.

-- this, mind you, in a far-off and primitive time when the annual revenue of <u>all</u> the Presbyterian Boards combined did not reach $150,000 --

> Let any one fairly consider these things in connexion with the department of education, or of domestic missions, or of foreign missions --- or of publication --- or of our seminaries of instruction, and he will at once perceive how vast is the end to be attained, and how wisely adapted must be the means for its attainment. [17]

---

[17] The same, p 461. Paragraphing supplied.

Now comes the ironclad conclusion from his analysis of the complexity of ongoing missionary operations.

> It will be thus most certain and evident that for the wise management of these operations, a permanent body of some kind, entrusted with discretionary powers, is absolutely necessary.
>
> If, therefore, as is admitted, the church is imperatively required to carry forward these enterprizes, then are some ecclesiastical bodies separate and distinct from the ordinary courts of the church not only occasionally and for a short term indispensably required.[18]

This language is clear. Smyth sees no barrier to "ecclesiastical bodies separate and distinct from the ordinary courts of the church."

Smyth now quotes verbatim the passage from Thornwell's Memorial, now printed as "A Calm Discussion," in which the young pastor become professor would put the financial arrangements in the hands of deacons -- "into the hands of men ordained under solemn sanctions for the purpose...." This is the place where Thornwell remarks that "[i]f all our boards were converted into mere benches of deacons, commissioned only to disburse funds under the direction of the spiritual courts, there would be no serious ground of objection to them...." Ignoring -- though printing, a mark of fairness common to the 19th Century -- Thornwell's further sentence about the present Boards, that "[t]hey are virtually the head of the church -- their will is law -- their authority irresistible; and they combine what God has separated, the purse and the keys[,]" Smyth compares this simple finance-disbursement scheme with the apparatus necessary to do Board work as

---

[18]The same. Paragraphing supplied.

Boards are doing it. He is so appalled at the results of the comparison that he is ready to make all his case turn on this one overwhelming point and then to rest it:

> I fearlessly stake the issue of this controversy[, Smyth explains,] upon the single question --- Is this system of means adequate to the wants --- or does it in any measure meet the difficulties of the case?
>
> Would any merchant in this mercantile country, entrust to such an agency the accomplishment of such ends, involving such interest, and requiring for their management such continual oversight, such deliberative wisdom[?]
>
> Would any sensible and prudent minded Christian man commit the affairs of our missionary boards, with their hundreds of employed missionaries --- their numerous churches --- and their continually increasing openings for enlarged usefulness, --- or our board of education with hundreds of young men in its watch and care, --- or our board of publication, with all the responsibilities it involves --- during the twelve months that intervene between one meeting of the Assembly and another --- to "a bench of deacons commissioned only to disburse funds," which funds are to be raised only by deacons within the bounds of each several congregations?
>
> I will venture to say there is not a man to be found who believes in the necessity and importance of the ends to be attained by these several boards, and who is anxious for its accomplishment, that would adopt the system here proposed as in any measure adequate to such ends.[19]

How, asks Smyth, are the funds to be raised which these Deacons are to disburse?[20]

Where, asks Smyth, is there Scriptural precedent for Deacons serving outside the limits of the local congregation?[21]

---

[19]The same. p 463. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[20]The same, p 466.

[21]The same.

Far more important, where is the organization of the work? Where is its supervision?

There is to our minds, no adaptation in the system here proposed of the means to the end.

It is perfectly chimerical.

It bases a system of practical operation upon a mere theoretical hypothesis.

It assumes a self-controlling, self perpetuating principle, to exist somewhere or somehow within these operations.

It attributes to our several judicatories a foresight and wisdom which can provide for the thousand contingencies which may arise during the course of every year, and that they could make all those provisional arrangements in the course of a brief session which now occupy busily during the entire year, our several officers and committees.

It assumes that the funds will be voluntarily forthcoming from all our churches in every portion of the church.

It seems to imply that such benches of deacons, and such general treasurers[,] can be found to devote themselves to such agencies and duties, and to do so gratuitously.

The whole scheme is built upon hypothesis and the most utopian and gratuitous assumptions.

It sets at defiance all consequences --- all the calculations of prudence --- and all the lessons of experience.

It would pull down, subvert and destroy existing institutions, before it has erected others to supply their place, and while there are no materials and no workmen by which such buildings can be possibly erected.

The question then being whether our present system of agencies shall be suspended or this scheme be adopted --- the alternative most assuredly is ---

> the rejection of this hypothesis, or the suspension of all the benevolent operations of our church.[22]

If one of Thornwell's objections to the Boards is that the system creates new officers unknown to Scripture, Smyth replies that Thornwell's extra-congregational Deacon is even less known there. In two pages of argument he maintains that "there is not a particle of evidence in the New Testament to support the idea that deacons were officers in the church Catholic and not officers of some particular church."[23]

> To make deacons, then, the officers of Presbyteries and Synods, is to create new officers unknown to scripture[;] and to constitute benches of deacons for the purpose of disbursing funds for missionary and other operations, however proper such employment may be in itself considered, is nevertheless to assign to them duties not given in the word of God; and for which nothing like a precept can be any where discovered. The Bible knows nothing of deacons but as officers appointed in each particular church, for the single purpose of taking care of the poor, and distributing among them the collections raised for their use ---(Acts vi. 1, 2.) This scheme,[24] therefore, is wholly unsupported by scripture.

If it is a matter of expanding the role of the Deacon, Smyth says, it is not merely unscriptural, it is unconstitutional. The Form of Government limits the deacon to the local congregation.[25]

> To appoint deacons, therefore, "as collecting agents of the Presbytery, in every congregation," is to

---

[22]The same, pp 463-464. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[23]The same, p 465.

[24]The same.

[25]The same.

> interfere with the established authority and duties of church sessions, through whom alone any such appointment can be constitutionallly made.
>
> And to institute "a committee of deacons appointed by the Assembly" for "the transmission of funds to foreign parts, would be an interference with the provisions of the constitution, and as it regards the nature of the office thus assigned --- the officers to whom it is given --- and the body by which the appointment is made. No such duties can be constitutionally assigned to deacons, as deacons, nor by the Assembly as such, since it cannot remove from particular churches their particular officers without their full consent.[26]

A new court in the church? Such a Board of Deacons would be the newest of all.[27] By the time the mercantile agents are added, and perhaps disbursing boards principally of business men -- Smyth does not find Thornwell insisting that these be even Deacons -- we shall have three new species of officer in the Presbyterian Church.[28]

Smyth is then ready to rest his case so far as the ground embraced by his first installment is concerned: that Ecclesiastical Boards are necessary, and that the proposed arrangements offered by the objectors are altogether untenable and insufficient.

> I confess the whole scheme appears to my mind preposterous in the extreme.
>
> And since our objectors have been again and again required to produce some substituted agency more conformable to scripture and more likely to secure the ends in view than those already established, and this is the

---

[26]The same, p 466. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[27]The same.

[28]The same.

> only result of long and frequent meditation --- our conclusion is that no such system can be devised, and that while our existing system may be open to objection and may be susceptible of many improvements, it is notwithstanding necessary, proper, and to be faithfully preserved.[29]

To this Thornwell would reply, as Smyth was aware, that an unconstitutional arrangement is untenable regardless of considerations of expediency. To this objection Smyth now turns his attention.

> II. Ecclesiastical Boards [are] accordant with the Standards of the Presbyterian Church, and [are] therefore Constitutional.
>
> SUFFICIENT has been said[, Smyth begins,] in order to expose the untenableness of the ground taken against our ecclesiastical organizations. Every reasonable mind will revolt against their destruction until some better system, free from the objections urged against the present, can be devised.[30]

He is a 19th-Century debater, not a 20th; he puts Thornwell's central thesis out for inspection, together with other key summaries of the Calm Discussion:

> "The objections which have influenced our minds[," Smyth accurately quotes Thornwell as having stated, "] are radical and fundamental. We believe that the system in its essential principles is directly subversive of the Constitution of our church, unknown to the word of God, and unsupported by any arguments of expediency or necessity which can commend it to the understanding of a Christian man."

---

[29] The same, p 467. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[30] Thomas Smyth, "A serious Review of 'A Calm Discussion of the Lawfulness, Scripturalness, and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Boards' --- Being a Defence of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church," in The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, VII:12, December 1841, p 560.

> So also in his introduction, the writer speaks of "this system of measures which certainly has no surer foundations than that of prescription;" while in his conclusion he says, "we can have no reason to expect the assistance of the Lord, when we have trampled his institutions in the dust."[31]

This is an acceptable starting point for Smyth. He is delighted not to be defending the paid honorary memberships, the tendency of the Boards to perpetuate themselves, their freedom from due inspection, their present division into Board and Executive Committee. He will not object to merging Board with Executive Committee "into a single body --- responsible directly to the General Assembly --- and in every respect subject to its control."[32]

> The single question is whether for carrying on her missionary and other operations, the Assembly may scripturally and constitutionally appoint any body to whom shall be entrusted the management of these various operations during the intervals which elapse between the yearly sessions of that judicatory.
>
> This is the single question.
>
> That the Assembly has such power, is the only point for which we contend, and it is as plainly the principle against which the objector utters such a withering condemnation.[33]
>
> Such an agency, call it either a board or a committee, as he maintains, is "directly subversive of the form of government embodied in the constitituion of our own church." "These courts (i.e. Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods, and the General Assembly) are treated in our constitution as abundantly adequate to meet all the exigencies of the church, and to do all that God requires her to do in her ecclesiastical capacity."

---

[31] The same.

[32] The same.

[33] The same, p 561. Paragraphing supplied.

> It is, therefore, argued that since these agencies or boards are neither Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods, or General Assembly, the Assembly in appointing them transcends the powers given to it by the Constitution.[34]

Immediately Smyth gives his own position:

> Now in contrariety to this, we affirm that such boards, agencies, or committees, with such powers, and for such ends, are necessary to carry out the purposes for which the Assembly itself was organized, and are therefore constitutional; and that some such agency is contemplated by our standards, and is, therefore, to be considered as in unquestionable accordance with them.[35]

Smyth's first line of attack in support of his affirmation is to "lay it down as a universal principle that the imposition of any duty implies the correspondent right to use such means as are necessary to its discharge."[36] In the space of two pages he argues that the duties of benevolent operations are incumbent on the church courts and especially on the General Assembly; that they cannot remain in continuous session; that the vigorous prosecution of the work is required. To dissolve the boards and limit administration to the times the courts were in actual session would destroy the benevolent operations. Therefore "our boards in their essential and radical principles must be constitutional."[37]

This is the argument by the principle that the conveyance of authority to devise means is implied in the imposition of duty. Smyth maintains further, however, that

---

[34]The same, pp 561-562. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[35]The same, p 562.

[36]The same.

[37]The same. p 563.

the authority for Boards is expressly given in the Presbyterian Constitution. In his development of this position, we observe, he is unable to come up with chapter and verse. What he quotes Form of Government as saying, is that the Assembly is to constitute the bond of union among our churches, to promote CHARITY, to bring the gospel to the destitute, to send missionaries to ANY PART (or to any country) to plant churches or to supply vacancies. Followed by each of these, outside of the quotations from the Form of Government, Smyth repeats his previous argument in phrases such as these: "[H]ow, in the name of common sense, is the Assembly, during one brief session, to provide for all the interests involved in such operations for a whole year[?] The very statement of the case makes palpably demonstrative the constitutional power here given to that body for the organization of a board, appointed by itself for the effectual oversight and management of such extensive operations."[38]

"The same reasoning applies with equal force," Smyth goes on to say, "to the other branches of that benevolent enterprize which it is the sacred duty of the church to carry on with ever increasing energy."[39] Here, if we leave Smyth and consult the Form of Government, we can see that there is not a word in the Form of Government about any branch of benevolent enterprize except the sending of missionaries. It had been drawn to provide for evangelistic work, before the development of proliferated benevolent interests and of advanced Board structures.

Smyth's common-sense argument is: the work must be done; it must be done by the church; the church's courts

---

[38]The same.

[39]The same, p 564.

are intermittent bodies ill suited for continuous supervision of work; therefore the church courts must by implied powers have the authority to set up the continuous supervision.

Smyth suggests, however, that the objectors in allowing for a board or committee of merchants, business men or deacons to be set up to handle the funds, have given their case away.

> Now here the principle for which we contend, is certainly admitted. It is granted that some agency is necessary. It is granted that that agency must be distinct from the Assembly --- and it is granted that the Assembly may and of right ought to institute such an agency. But while he would confine it to the management of funds merely, we would extend it to the far more important and moral interests involved in these glorious enterprizes, of Christian charity.[40]

Smyth is about to take a position diametrically opposed to Thornwell's concern that the spiritual be administered only by the duly constituted spiritual courts; just as by the reverse of the coin, material affairs should be administered by "officers not spiritual in the Church."[41]

> While he would make it a committee of finance, we would clothe them with spiritual and moral responsibilities becoming the work for whose prosperity they are needed. While he would invent a new class of officers, called deacons of Presbyteries, and deacons of Synods, and Deacons of the Assembly, and combine these into new bodies and assign to them extra constitutional duties, we would select ministers and elders who are by divine right spiritual governors and overseers of the interests of the church --- to whom the powers necessary for such a management of these operations are given by our Constitution --- who are fit and proper members of our ecclesi-

---

[40] The same, p 565.

[41] See above, p

> astical courts --- and to whom, therefore, such weighty responsibilities may be fitly given.[42]

Smyth, in other words, will give to ministers and elders, who are qualified to sit in Presbytery and Synod and Assembly, the authority to sit in other bodies created by the Assembly and which are necessary to carry out the Assembly's responsibilities.

From these considerations Smyth turns to take up some objections offered by his opponents.

The secretaries and other Board officers, he says, are not new officers; they remain ministers and elders. They are exactly analagous to ministers and elders who serve on the faculties of seminaries and colleges.[43]

Neither are the Boards new church courts.

> They neither claim nor possess original and inherent powers. They do not pretend by virtue of any such authority to execute laws and distribute justice. Nor do they assume any such prerogative as the ordering of whatever pertains to the spiritual welfare of the churches.
>
> These boards have no such powers whatever. They have no original, inherent or independent existence at all. They are the offspring of our highest ecclesiastical court --- created by it --- responsible to it --- existing only at its will --- performing only its work --- and restrained in everything by the code of by-laws sanctioned by that body.

---

[42] Thomas Smyth, "A Serious Review of 'A Calm Discussion of the Lawfulness, Scripturalness, and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Boards' --- Being a Defence of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church." The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, VII:12, December 1841, p 565.

[43] The same, p 566.

> And as they have no original authority,[44] so neither have they any final powers.

Smyth, in fact, sees them in exactly the opposite light from that shone on them by Thornwell:

> Their business is unfinished until it receives the imprimatur of the Assembly, by which it must be reviewed. and by which it may be reversed or altered. They are merely the agents --- the hand --- the organs of the body, and by which it wields its own power. Such an agency our standards recognize and our objector allows.
>
> In short, these boards, reviewed in their essential principle, are precisely what the writer defines to be committees. They "are appointed for two purposes, to prepare and arrange business for the body which appoints them, and to execute specific trusts by the order and direction of that body to which they are responsible."[45]

Committee in fact, Smyth continues, they are Boards only in name, and that "the board and the committee are now separate; is a feature in their organization which might be easily changed, and their identification with this definition of a committee be made as perfect in form as it is in fact."[46]

As for exercising ecclesiastical powers, the chief of these is of ordination. The Boards do not touch it, nor do they try for crimes and heresy. If they appoint missionaries, that is what they are for![47] If the Board takes oversight over churches abroad, it infringes on no Presbytery, since Presbyterial authority stops at Presbytery boundaries. When enough missionaries are arrived, they will

---

[44]The same, p 566. Paragraphing supplied.

[45]The same.

[46]The same.

[47]The same; p 569.

constitute a Presbytery on the spot.[48]

What then of Thornwell's assertion that the Boards interfere with the parity of the clergy, "and invest their officers with a control over their brethren, and a power in the church just as real and just as dangerous as that of a prelate!!"? Here, says Smyth, is no inherent control, but only the abuse of position.

> Let, then, this power be guarded and restrained in every possible and proper manner, but let not an evil which is incidental, be made a sufficient ground for the abandonment of a most necessary office.
>
> It is perfectly idle to frighten us with the imaginary picture of new orders in these ecclesiastical functionaries. They are and can be no other than simple ministers or elders, nor is any individual subjected to their personal authority, or excluded from the privilege of presenting any symptoms of arbitrary conduct for the reprobation of the General Assembly.[49]

Smyth feels confident that he has taken up each of the objectors' complaints and dealt with them in such a way that their error will be as plain as it was to the members of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia. Far from being the independent monsters their detractors allege, the Boards are the tame, domesticated, faithful, essential servants of the Church whose General Assembly represents all her interests.

> The Assembly, therefore, appoints an agency to attend to these matters during its adjournment, and to report in full at its next sessions. This appointment is annually renewed --- the reports heard --- and all needful directions given. These agencies or boards acting for the Assembly --- and under its authority ---

---

[48]The same, p 567.

[49]The same, p 568. Paragraphing supplied.

> and for the accomplishment of its work, which could not otherwise possibly be done, are properly in the eyes of the constitution and of reason, the church, by her Assembly fulfilling the trust committed to her by her glorious Head.
>
> Our ecclesiastical boards are, therefore, necessary to carry out the provisions of the constitution --- they contravene no principle or law of our standards.
>
> Being the creatures of the Assembly, and dependent upon its yearly appointments, and subject to its entire control, they may be in everything conformed to the wishes of the church, and are, therefore to be regarded as eminently Presbyterian in their character, and worthy of the most entire confidence, and the most zealous support of every one who loves the church of his fathers --- the true model of primitive and apostolic Christianity.[50]

For Smyth, then, creatures which are responsible to and controlled by the General Assembly are "eminently Presbyterian."

His final phrase in this second installment is a measure of how far apart he and Thornwell are. Thornwell's chief point is that the Boards introduce a concept and structure so foreign to apostolic Christianity that it cannot even abide in peace with the Presbyterian governmental system which is based on, but admittedly not identical with, that Christianity of early days. But Smyth sees the whole as "the true model of primitive and Apostolic Christianity."

Which man was right?

To answer that question, we would have to ask the Apostles; and that is in effect what Thomas Smyth proposes to do in the third and last installment of his Serious Review

---

[50]The same. Paragraphing supplied.

of James Henley Thornwell's Calm Discussion of the Lawfulness, Scripturalness, and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Boards.

Smyth believes that he is ready.

> III. Ecclesiastical Boards are not contrary to but [are] in full accordance with[,] the principles laid down in the Word of God.[51]

Like a good debater he sums up his own argument to this point before going on.

> If the ends contemplated by our ecclesiastical organizations are necessary and all important --- if to secure these ends some agency besides the authoritative legislation of our ecclesiastical courts is also essential --- if the system of means proposed by the objectors to our present Boards is wholly insufficient to meet the difficulties of the case, and in itself seriously objectionable --- then are our present Boards, in their essential principles to be retained, however they may be modified.
>
> That our standards empower the General Assembly to engage in those benevolent operations whose management is entrusted to our Boards, has been made apparent.
>
> That some such agency as our Boards is absolutely required by the Assembly, for their oversight and direction, has been also proved; while the futility of all objections against their constitutionality has been briefly exposed.[52]

Noting that the objectors advance as conclusive evidence against the Boards the assertion that they are unscriptural,

---

[51]Thomas Smyth, "A Serious Review of 'A Calm Discussion of the Lawfulness, Scripturalness, and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Boards,' --- Being a Defence of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church." In Spirit of the XIX. Century, I:1, January 1842, p 26.

[52]The same. Additional paragraphing supplied.

and quoting their position,[53] Smyth proceeds to his refutation of this claim on two grounds.

The first is that since he is arguing with those who admit the perfect scripturality of the Westminster Standards, and since he has just shown the compatibility of Boards with those standards, they should consider the matter settled in favor of the Boards.[54]

The second is a variation of what has gone before in the first two installments. The Scriptures lay on the church the duty of the work of our benevolent operations; these are the one great responsibility of the church, for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. We assume, he says, that this can be best performed through the General Assembly.[55]

> Our General Assembly, then, being, as the objector will admit, scripturally authorized and required, as the organ of the church, to prosecute to the utmost of its ability, these several branches of Christian benevolence --- the only question is whether this work can be done at all, or at least done to any advantage, by the Assembly in its own person, or whether it is necessary by the Assembly, as supreme direction, guide and legislator, and several boards or agencies, which may outlive the sessions of that body and continue in vigorous operation when that body is defunct and incapable of action.[56]

Again Smyth applies his basic principle, that the imposition of a duty implies the authority to devise means necessary for the fulfullment of the duty.[57] For Smyth its

---

[53]The same.

[54]The same.

[55]The same, pp 26-27.

[56]The same, p 27.

[57]The same. Additional paragraphing supplied.

importance cannot be overemphasized:

> This principle we must affirm to be undeniably certain.
>
> It would tie up the hands and feet of our sacred polity and deprive it of all power of motion. It would emasculate it of all its strength and vigour and reduce it to a helpless and exanimate system.
>
> That which the church is required to do, she is empowered to do by all means not expressly forbidden, or implicitly countermanded, and it will not surely be pretended that the Assembly being scripturally ordained, an agency for the certain and efficient prosecution of its necessary duties, is any where so forbidden. The church is the converter of the heathen --- the regenerator of our waste and ruined world.
>
> But as represented in her General Assembly, she can act in this matter only for a few days, and therefore most imperfectly. She must, therefore, employ in subserviency to this court, subordinate agencies or boards, which are, therefore, as plainly sanctioned by the divine word.[58]

To apply the objector's principle consistently would "subvert the foundations of every church on earth....It would wipe out, as with a sponge, nine-tenths of all that is said in our Form of Government and Discipline."[59] After all, the Form of Government admits that many of its provisions are not specifically required by Scripture, but are simply in line with scriptural principles.[60] Smyth is outraged.

> The objection is evidently untenable --- unsound --- and utterly subversive of all liberty of action beyond the mere letter of the law.

---

[58]The same. Paragraphing supplied. Italics added.

[59]The same.

[60]The same, p 28.

It is Judaical.

It would overturn the glorious liberty of the gospel dispensation.[61]

To accept the objector's position "would again subject us to the bondage of the law....[F]rom this yoke of rules and ceremonies the Son of God emancipated his church." All the reformers are in agreement with Smyth against the objector --- "the non-conformists even, the most strict constructionists among them."[62]

> And right sure we are, that their spirit has not died with them, but is even now burning in the hearts of their honoured successors, who would exultingly bear testimony for this liberty of God's ransomed church, even on the scaffold or at the stake.[63]

At this point Thomas Smyth of Charleston wishes to make an important distinction. Necessary as it is for the Church to carry out her obligations through her Boards, this is a very different thing from saying that the Boards are explicitly commanded in Scripture and their support binding on God's people.

> Did our church undertake to declare that her ecclesiastical organizations were of divine right --- were in all their detail instituted by Christ --- were to be received as his, and to be implicitly obeyed --- and that they were a necessary part of her divine polity, and thus binding on the conscience of her members, not as a good means toward a necessary end, but as in themselves necessary --- then indeed would she jeopard her authority and prelatize the church --- and call forth from every true-hearted Presbyterian the strong language of indignant rebuke, and stout and unyielding resistance.[63]

---

[61]The same. Paragraphing supplied.

[62]The same.

[63]The same, p 29.

We can criticize the Boards, adjust them, improve them; but we cannot condemn them:

> [W]hen our Assembly, for the certain and successful accomplishment of duties devolved upon her by the Head of the church, and by us, its members --- appoints these bodies, as in her wisdom, the best instrumentality through which she can achieve these purposes --- then indeed we are at liberty to point out deficiencies, and to correct mistaken policy, and to adjust the system to a perfect accordance with the general rules of scripture and of our standards --- but to say that the appointment itself is unscriptural and un-Presbyterian, is preposterous in the extreme.[64]

Smyth knows that as a Protestant, and a Protestant recently arrived from Ireland at that, he is in the direct line of the English Puritan divines in his spiritual descent from Calvin and Luther. He has come to one of the crucial points made by the Reformation, a point which in the British Isles was worked out by the Puritans, fresh in spirit as it were from Geneva, in opposition to the decision of the hierarchy and head of the Church of England to retain many of the features of worship that were characteristic of the Roman Catholic Church. Smyth agrees that "an original, inherent, or legislative power over the house of God, we as consistent Protestants utterly deny to the church." Her power is "ministerially to declare the will of God, and to carry out the requirements of heaven, in accordance with the general rules of God's holy word...."[66]

Again --- for this is the heart of Smyth's position ---

---

[64]The same.

[65]The same.

[66]The same.

> Where Scripture requires any thing to be done, without specifying the manner in which it is to be done, we are of necessity left to the guidance of its general rules and right reason.
>
> So where our Standards enjoin, or imply, any duty, but do not specifically declare the way in which it is to be discharged, here also, are we left to select such means as are best adapted to compass the end in accordance with its general rules.[67]

Smyth quotes Calvin on the liberty of conscience. "'If human laws tend to introduce any scruple into our minds, as though the observance of them were essentially necessary, we assert that they are unreasonable impositions on the conscience.'"[68]

Having come this far, it is plain that Smyth's argument for the Scriptural warrant for Boards rests on a principle of interpretation in general, rather than on explicit passages which either command their erection or describe their formation and operation in the New Testament Christian community. He rests his argument on "this power and liberty of the church,"[69] and then in a footnote to that phrase gives an important reference to Owen, known by all theologically educated Presbyterians in that day as a key figure in the development of English protestantism in reaction to the dominant and less thoroughly reforming party in the Church of England.

---

[67] The same, p 30.

[68] The same, p 30. This is the last of a series of sentences Smyth gathers from Calvin, all on the general theme of protection from efforts to bind Christians with man-made laws in the church. Although Smyth evidently thinks them in agreement with his position, as given they appear to lie equally well against the imposition of Boards as being nowhere explicitly commanded in Scripture.

[69] The same, p 31.

This principle of Protestantism is thus laid down by Dr. Owen, in his Answer to Stillingfleet, (Works, vol. 20, p. 282,) and he might be supposed to present it in its strictest form:

> "The first general principle the Protestants pleaded, was that the Scripture, the word of God, is a perfect rule of faith and religious worship; so as that nothing ought to be admitted, which is repugnant unto it in general rule or especial prohibition, nothing IMPOSED that is not prescribed therein, but that everyone is at liberty to refuse and reject every thing of that kind."

And in illustrating the evils which arose from the neglect of this principle, he says,

> "this persuasion in some places made further progress, namely, that it was lawful to impose on the consciences and practices of men such things in religious worship, provided that they concerned outward order, rites, rule and ceremonies, as are no where prescribed in Scripture, and that on severe penalties, ecclesiastical and civil. This almost utterly destroyed the great fundamental principle of all the reformation whereon the reformers justified their separation from the church of Rome."[70]

It is a striking passage, strong and vigorous and clear, as was the habit of the English reformers who stemmed from the strong and vigorous and clear frame of mind popular in Geneva; and it is something of a problem. It so clearly comes down on the objector's side of the argument, that the question is bound to arise in the reader's mind as to why Smyth should print it at all --- and as to why Smyth should read it as favoring his own side of the question. Owen is arguing against the power of the church to set up what is not expressly commanded; the liberty he advocates is liberty <u>from</u> such additions to the life of the church, not the

---

[70]The same, Footnote. Additional paragraphing supplied.

liberty to construct them. We must conclude, however, that Smyth was so certain of his own position that he read even the classical Owen as being in support of it.[71]

He is frank to state that what he is outlining is the area in which Christians are, so to speak, on their own. "Thus far are we, as Christians and as Presbyterians, at liberty to consult expediency, in carrying out any measures of Christian duty. Only it is to be carefully observed that just where expediency begins --- there does the power of binding the conscience cease....[I]t were spiritual despotism to enforce as necessary, that which is enjoined only upon the grounds of expediency."[72]

Turning from the high grounds of first principles, Smyth now addresses himself to the practical criticism made by the objectors to Boards, that they offer no security against the appointment of unorthodox, heretical, unsound or un-Presbyterian missionaries. His quotation of the Calm Discussion is, as always, fair and to the point. Thornwell had said

---

[71] It must always be kept in mind that the leaders of the Reformation, in Germany, Switzerland, England and Scotland, had a keen historical sense which included the acute observation that over long periods of time, small changes agglomerate and evolve into trends which produce large changes.

For these Reformers, the safeguard for New Testament Christianity in all its aspects lies in hewing to the line against non-New Testament accretions.

[72] Thomas Smyth, "A Serious Review of 'A Calm Discussion of the Lawfulness, Scripturalness, and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Boards' --- Being a Defence of the Ecclesisastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church." Part Three. In Spirit of the XIX. Century, I:1, January 1842, p 31.

that contributors to a Board had no way of knowing "'whether they are sustaining Arminians, Semi-Pelagians, or Presbyterians' --- or 'whether they are building up or pulling down the kingdom of the Redeemer.'"[73] Smyth is as upset at such talk as any Board Secretary, and for the same reason. "[W]hat is this, but at once to make it the duty of every truth-loving man, to withdraw his charity, and to shut up his bowels of compassion?"[74]

Smyth's confidence in the integrity of Boards, now and for all future time, is without bounds:

> We boldly say, that no such ground for any reasonable fears... can be pointed out.
>
> We confidently affirm that our Boards
>
> increase,
>
> and may be made still further to increase,
>
> and that they cannot possibly decrease,
>
> that security which would be afforded to the church for the orthodoxy of her mis[s]ionaries sent out by their respective Presbyteries.[75]

Would Thornwell's recommendation, that Presbyteries send out their own missionaries, afford any better protection? By no means; and has not the objector given himself away on this point, when "has himself told us, 'that Presbyteries are sometimes as mischievous as any other bodies.'[?]

> What if the majority of such a Presbytery are disposed to countenance error, or are incapable of

---

[73]The same, p 32.

[74]The same.

[75]The same. Smyth, like Thornwell, is a young man. Not quite so young, but still young enough to set his confidence in princes.

> discovering its latent springs? Or what if any individual is inclined to disguise his sentiments, and to assume a character of temporary orthodoxy?
>
> Absolute security we never can have, by any conceivable process, for the perfect correctness in every necessary doctrine of our licentiates or ordained ministers. And even if such certainty could be attained to day, by what means is such a condition of perfect orthodoxy to be perpetuated, in every such individual?[76]

"Every missionary," Smyth says -- he is dealing, as noted earlier, with the situation which existed before domestic and foreign Boards had shifted away from their original primary commitment to evangelism; in Smyth's day the Boards as a matter of course appointed only ordained ministers of the gospel -- "every missionary, before he can come before them for any appointment whatever, must give evidence that he has been received and licensed or ordained, by some Presbytery in good standing in our Church."[77]

> Whatever the Boards have to do in the matter, they can, in no way, interfere with that full security which our objector requires, and which certainly should be possessed.[78]

---

[76]The same, pp 32-33.

[77]The same, p 33.

> The Board Smyth was particularly defending had by 1975 for at least half a century given up the requirement that its appointees, even if ordained, be members of a Presbytery of the Board's denomination.
>
> What Smyth would have written on learning that the Board of World Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, heir to the support of Smyth's Charleston Presbytery, had appointed a Roman Catholic as one of his missionaries, charity forbids the speculative mind to contemplate.

[78]The same, p 34.

By representing the General Assembly, Smyth elaborates, the Board is a protection for orthodoxy. Unsound men from unsound Presbyteries will be screened out by "that vigilant" circumspection [the Boards] are required to exercise for preventing the introduction into any field under their care, of any unworthy candidate."[79]

In conclusion Thomas Smyth of Charleston, the defender of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, recapitulates his concern over the practical effect of these attacks.

> Most certain it is, that no warrantable pretext has been afforded him, for publishing such a sweeping condemnation, on such serious grounds, of these appointed agencies of the church.
>
> He has inflicted a wound [which] may be very difficult to heal, and whose festering sore may long continue to give uneasiness and pain to the body spiritual. The objector and his colleagues in this work of opposition, have talents, influence, and power. They may carry their views with irresistible force to many minds.
>
> They may thus alienate the resources of the church, while she is but commencing her glorious course of heavenly charity. We would beseech and entreat them as brethren, to pause, before they advance further in this career, and not to hazard the peace, union, and prosperity of the church, and the successful prosecution of our benevolent operations.[80]

"Not to hazard the peace, union and prosperity of the church" by publishing radical criticism of her Boards, "on such serious grounds." To Smyth, it was a lamentable thing to alienate by criticism the resources of the church from her

---

[79]The same.

[80]The same, pp 34-35.

official Boards and agencies. In time, to do so would become the second greatest offense possible against the Presbyterian church, taking precedence over all save the offense against structural unity. But to trace the growth of this principle here set forth by Thomas Smyth, into a more extreme form than he had in mind as a moderate in an age of extremes, must await some other investigator; perhaps the reader?

Meanwhile, Smyth is ready for the summary of his case.

> The lawfulness and scripturalness of ecclesiastical Boards, have we trust, been now demonstrated; and the untenableness of all objections urged against them exposed.
>
> Neither is it necessary for us at any length distinctly to consider the objection against the expediency of such organizations. This subject has been already necessarily considered in its principle, and the true source of the objector's difficulties pointed out.
>
> Expediency is unquestionably a necessary and lawful guide --- not to the discovery or the determination of duty --- but to its accomplishment, in every case where a detailed plan has not been prescribed.
>
> The duty of the church is, in the case under discussion, imperative. The specific mode in which that duty is to be carried into full effect, is not laid down --- and therefore, while any wise plan which is accordant to the general rules of Scripture, is lawful, experience and prudence must determine which is most expedient.[81]

Smyth would unite with his objecting brethren in many of their proposed amendments, he adds; but he cannot partake in "their responsibility in thus holding up to reprobation, the whole machinery by which every benevolent operation of the

---

[81] The same, p 35. Additional paragraphing supplied. Italics added.

church is conducted[.]"[82]

> And in the spirit of the most affectionate kindness, (and towards one, of the most respectful deference and regard,) we would entreat them to remember that while it is easy to destroy, it is most difficult to restore, and that over the ruins of our present noble charities, we may all have cause to weep in bitter lamentation.[83]

Our American experience is confirmed, Smyth adds, by Presbyterian churches abroad, which have found that Boards comport well in their countries with the Presbyterian system; while at home, in the area served by the Southern Board of Foreign Missions,

> no general agency has been in this field. The churches were fully apprized that none might be expected, and that they must voluntarily put forth their strength.
>
> Our Synod passed resolutions encouraging such liberality, and our ministers made willing promises of co-operation. And yet during the last year, out of some one hundred and seventy churches, within the bounds of that Board and of the Synod of S. C. and Geo., not more than twenty...did any thing at all for foreign missions, and a still fewer number observed the monthly concert for prayer, at all.
>
> Strange, too, as it may appear, yet it is a fact,

---

[82]The same, p 35.

[83]The same.

> Smyth here lets drop, for the moment, the convention of anonymity which allowed unsigned articles in the Journals of the day to make their points without overtly engaging in personalities. The presumption here is that Smyth can identify at least The Village Pastor, Breckinridge, Thornwell and Coit as vocal objectors to the Board system, and that the one to whom he would show not merely kindness but deference and respect would be Robert J. Breckinridge. Whether the phrasing is intended to convey, or conveys, the idea that he feels neither deference nor respect towards the others, the reader alone can judge.

> that the amount raised in even these few churches were in more than half the number, collected through the assistance of some extraneous agency.[84]

Smyth has put his final argument on the table, the practical experience of what happened in his own territory when Agents were abolished or at least officially discouraged. What he does not furnish, we note, are comparative statistics; we who have read the Minutes of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia remember that the Synod's record was low in benevolence statistics before the change. We would feel easier had the lamentable figures, poor and substantially correct as they are, been placed in perspective. We are only too well aware that most of the church makes no contribution to foreign missions at all.[85]

In sum,

> The perfect consistency of such ecclesiastical Boards or Agencies, therefore, with Scripture, and with our Standards; and their absolute necessity to the conduct of such extensive schemes of Christian charity, are thus made to rest upon the certain ground of universal experience --- as well as upon the most clear, evident, and irrefragible arguments.[86]

Smyth will go further. Benevolent operations, he concludes, are so dependent on the existence of ecclesiastical

---

[84]The same, p 36.

[85]The text above speaks of Smyth's time, but it is equally true of the mid- and late Twentieth Century. For a discussion of the problem from the standpoint of comparative statistics, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, p 190. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[86]The same.

Boards, that without the Boards there can be no such operations. His language is completely clear. On this final insistence of the necessity of Boards Smyth closes his review of Thornwell's paper.

> Such Boards and Agencies are absolutely required for the furtherance of such benevolent operations.
>
> The one cannot exist and thrive where the others are wanting.
>
> They are, in the present state of the church, correllative the one to the other; so that where the one is necessary, the other must be introduced, and where the means are wanting, the end will never be secured.[87]

Breckinridge had received this long manuscript from Charleston while his other South Carolina writer, it will be remembered, was travelling abroad in the assurance that without an ocean voyage and a less continental climate for a season, his remaining days would be few.

As party to the debate, the Baltimore pastor has held his peace during the three issues which carried the successive installments of Smyth's attack on Breckinridge and Thornwell's position. But not being sure, perhaps, of a date by which he could count on a rebuttal from Thornwell, or perhaps only because Robert J. Breckinridge could be depended on to make his contribution to any current controversy, and to stir one up if no existing fracas was conveniently to hand, he appends as an Editor's note a fresh contribution of his own, together with disclaimers as to much of what Smyth had written.

> A great deal that has been said, [Breckinridge explains,] we agree with; a great deal has appeared to

---

[87]The same.

us fully to sustain our views, while apparently adduced to confute them; a portion, has seemed to us devoted to points purely speculative, and not going to the gist of the question; and some things, we have been obliged to dissent from entirely. This much, with all respect for the excellent and able author, we feel it our duty to say.

In regard to the questions of practical interest, put at issue, in these and similar discussions --- our own opinions have been deliberately made up, upon careful, and long continued observation and reflection.

We consider our system of Agencies, an absolute failure --- in every view of it, whether reference be had to our individual or to our organized operations, --- to Agents, properly so called, or to Boards as agencies for the church. We look on this as matter standing in <u>proof</u> --- and not in <u>argument</u>; and are ready to maintain our opinion by <u>facts</u> --- of the most complete and distressing character --- covering a period of years.

We are convinced, moreover, that the whole operation is founded on principles which it is extremely difficult to reconcile with the true nature of Presbyterianism and with the grand system of the gospel; and that a reform is equally obligatory and practicable. This matter standing in argument, and to be made good by the word of God, and by our standards, as contrasted with the principles, the powers, the acts and the influences of our Boards and Agents; and we are ready to maintain our convictions --- by what appears to us a conclusive demonstration of the evils to be corrected and the method of cure.

Meantime, our pages, are free for the full discussion of the subject.

[It is a] discussion, the importance of which they alone can appreciate,

--- who believe that the Presbyterian church has a great and glorious work to perform;

--- who remember that after years of efforts, not more, perhaps, than one-third of its congregations have ever been reached at all;

--- who reflect that on the present plan, it seems nearly if not absolutely impossible ever to reach them

> all statedly, and rouse them to regular and zealous effort, --- even if the plan itself was otherwise unobjectionable;
>
> --- and who consider, that from the enormous expensiveness of this decrepit plan, from the scruples of many as to the principles on which it proceeds, and from various other difficulties, which we cannot here enumerate, its hold on the churches, instead of strengthening daily, is scarcely[88] and with great difficulty maintained in statu quo.

The Boards and Agencies may for Thomas Smyth be "absolutely required" for the Church's benevolent operations; but for Ro. J. Breckinridge of Baltimore they are a "decripit plan" of enormous expense.

Breckinridge is speaking from the standpoint of experience. What, he may be pictured as asking himself with anticipation, will the Logician have to say, looking beyond immediate poor experience to ultimate development? How will Smyth's arguments strike Thornwell?

---

[88] The same, pp 36-37. List format supplied.

A VOYAGE INTO LIFE

When Robert Jefferson Breckinridge wrote, in his footnote to Thomas Smyth's defense of Presbyterian Church Boards, that he thought it probable that the author of the "Calm Discussion, &c.," would reply to the reviewer, he was right. He may not have known how probable it really was. But James Henley Thornwell would not only do everything in his power to carry his part of the task of awakening the Presbyterian Church to her mortal danger at the hands of her Boards and their Agency system, Thornwell was also bound to Breckinridge by ties even stronger than the Baltimore pastor may have realized.

On his way north to take passage in a sailing ship for Europe, a wreck[1] had delayed Thornwell in Washington City; but late one Saturday night in early May of 1841, he had arrived in Baltimore. Going to church next morning he had heard "an excellent sermon" from Breckinridge[2] and Breckinridge brought him home to stay and visit for a few days before it became time to push on to the mouth of the Hudson.

Thornwell was already an admirer of Breckinridge on more than one ground. The visit confirmed every good opinion the

---

[1] On what would later be the Pennsylvania Railroad before it sank into the morass of merger with the New York Central.

[2] Benjamin Morgan Palmer, Life of JHT, p 158.

South Carolinian had entertained of the Kentuckian.

> The more I see of him, the more I love him[, Thornwell wrote to his wife Nancy from New York on the 11th.] There is no man in the Church more misrepresented and more misunderstood. He is exceedingly affectionate, kind, and affable in his family, and among his people. He has some habits like my own. He loves to sleep in the morning, to smoke cigars, to sit up at night, and to tell funny stories.
>
> He is a very industrious and laborious man. Yesterday he made me write another article in reply to the Catholic priests, which will be published in the next Visitor. He has furnished me with some very flattering letters to ministers in Europe, for which I am very much indebted to him.[3]

Towed over the bar at Sandy Hook by the steamboat Hercules, the packet ship Columbus had spread her sails for what Thornwell with some reason expected to be a safer and less crowded passage than would have been the case had he trusted to one of the steamships on the North Atlantic run. His Bible and his Confession of Faith were his travelling companions. Thornwell in his shipboard journal "bless[ed] God for that glorious summary of Christian doctrine contained in our noble standards." He added, of the Confession of Faith, which one reading of as a young man had made him a Presbyterian on the spot, "It has cheered my soul in many a dark hour, and sustained me in many a desponding moment. I love to read it, and ponder carefully each proof-text as I

---

[3]The same, pp 159-160. Paragraphing supplied. Palmer adds as a footnote that the article Breckinridge made Thornwell write as the price of room and board between friends, was "the famous Essay on the Claims of the Apocrypha, which gave rise to the discussion with Dr. Lynch, and to his own book, entitled, 'Romanist Arguments Refuted.'..."

[4]This footnote number not used.

pass along."[5]

"Calms," he wrote, "are the school of patience; storms, of faith; and a voyage, as a whole, a fine school for every Christian grace."[6] Of the captain, who met Thornwell's idea "of what a sea-captain should be, in every respect but one," he wrote, "His external deportment is not only blameless and irreproachable, but to a certain extent exemplary; and apparently, all that he wants is a new heart. Ah! what a want is that."[7]

Here, as wherever we turn in James Henley Thornwell's personal papers, are the two great foundations of the American Presbyterian heritage which he had entered into voluntarily when just out of college, and made steadily more and more a part of himself year by year: the Westminster Confession of Faith seen as founded on the Scriptures and containing the system of doctrine taught there; and a warm religion of the heart.

So in head and heart, so in voyage. What for us is so often the make-believe of Hollywood reduced to the even smaller make-believe of a bulged piece of glass on the front of a piece of furniture in the living room, for Thornwell was the living ocean face to face -- an altogether different matter:

> "Monday, May 31st. --- To-day we have a rough sea; our vessel is tossing upon the waters like an egg-shell, and most of the passengers are sick.
>
> About five o'clock in the afternoon we had a most terrific squall. The waves were rolling like mountains,

---

[5]Palmer, Life of JHT, p 162.

[6]The same, p 163.

[7]The same, pp 163-164.

and every moment it seemed that our gallant ship must be engulphed. She was dashed now upon one side, now upon the other, now plunging her bow under huge billows which broke over her, and seemed as if they would sink her; and then riding the waves as if in defiance of their fury; the sea meanwhile foaming, and dashing, and roaring like constant thunder, and the wind howling through the rigging with deafening violence, while the heavens were scowling in blackness. The whole scene was one of terror and sublimity, which baffles all description.

One could hardly resist the impression that the vessel was conscious of her danger. She appeared to prepare herself to meet every wave, and to withstand every gust of wind. Sometimes we would appear to be several feet beneath the general level of the whole body of the sea ahead, which seemed rolling on to meet and crush us; but the vessel, as if instinct with life, would raise her bow and dash forward, as if driven by ten thousand furies, and fleeing for her safety.[8]

"Monday, June 7th. --- I preached yesterday. The cabin and steerage passengers, with the crew, made a very good congregation, and they listened very attentively. Wind against us yesterday and to-day."[9]

On Wednesday, June 16th, four weeks to the day after she left the wharf at New York, Captain Barstowe put his packet-ship Columbus against the docks at Liverpool and furled her sails. Thornwell took his breakfast in the Grecian Hotel, devoutly thankful for his safe passage. "The Lord's name be praised for all His mercies," he wrote, "and may He continue his loving kindness through all my wanderings, and through all my life."[10]

Enthralled with London and her surrounding villages, he walked, on the average, ten miles a day, spending the weeks

---

[8]The same, p 165. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[9]The same, p 166.

[10]The same.

in increasingly returning strength. Scotland he found rainy, and Paris cramped and ugly for all her perfect individual buildings; and by summer's end he was ready to come home. "My health now is as good as it ever has been in my life," he wrote to his wife from Paris on July 31st, "and I have little doubt that it would be better still, if I had not staid so long in the trying cold, and rainy climate of England.

> I have no cough, no blood-spitting; a fine appetite, a good digestion. I do not know that I am any fatter than I always was. I belong to the lean tribe, and am afraid there is no prospect of my getting much meat upon my bones.[11]

The orphan boy grown up, and under threat of death taken away from the children and wife who meant more than life to him, Thornwell had gained a renewed and deepened sense of "a wonderful and mysterious providence...." Never before in all his life had he enjoyed the Bible and communion with God so much, as he did upon the ocean.[12]

> I lived upon the Scripture, and can truly say, that, in a spiritual point of view, my voyage has been of as much service to my soul, as, in a physical respect, it has been to my body.[13]

Those who, like this James Henley Thornwell of the summer of 1841, have found themselves far from any familiar and beloved face, death on the wing close by, the Bible and the Westminster Confession of Faith their travelling companions amid perils against which only Providence, not prudence, can be protection, and who have been granted as he was a second set of years for the work of their calling, will be

---

[11]The same, p 179.

[12]The same, p 169.

[13]The same.

thankful for his wife and his biographer, and their successors through the years, who kept so carefully the brief and moving pages which come down to us from this young man's voyage into life renewed and deepened.

He learned afresh, as who has not on the distant shore of fate hanging in the balance, the inward force of the communion of the saints; and of friendship.

It has been, too, a great comfort to me to think that many of God's people are praying for my prosperity.

I wept freely when I read Coit's letter. Such a friend is a treasure beyond all price.[14]

We may imagine, then, that it was with a renewed and deepened sense of friendship that James Henley Thornwell sat down to write to Robert Jefferson Breckinridge in October of 1841, a little over a month after he had with journeying mercies been brought to the desired haven. "My Dear Brother," he began, "Having recently returned home, I have accomplished nothing yet....I presume that Smyth is the reviewer of my article on Boards. I shall soon notice his lucubrations. I have many things to say to you, but have not time now. May grace, mercy and peace be multiplied upon you."[15]

Breckinridge, answering about a month later after a long and painful absence, hoped that Thornwell would cover the whole ground, "nearly all which is given up in the long review of your article."[16] Breckinridge confessed that the Review rather confirmed him in his own opposite opinion. He had a new suggestion to offer -- and from it we can sense

---

[14]The same.

[15]The same, p 227.

[16]The same.

something of the difference between Thornwell, who early reaches his principles and seldom moves from them, and Breckinridge, whose mind constantly turns things over and throws out possibilities for consideration, one after another as events move along.

> [B]esides the clear distinction[, he asks,] between a small, standing, and responsible Committee, and a large, permanent, ill-constituted, and virtually irresponsible Board, what should forbid the Assembly itself, or a commission of it, to meet as often, by adjournment, as our Boards do? none of which meet oftener than monthly; one, at least (the Foreign one,) only yearly; and as fourteen commissioners, by our constitution, make an Assembly, (and, in point of fact, not so many as fourteen persons regularly attend our Boards,) the argument is for us, not for the reviewer. Excuse this. God bless you.
>
> In much haste and much esteem, yours ever,
>
> R. J. Breckinridge[17]

The professor who has been away from his classroom for any length of time, especially if his health has been something of a problem to him, does not always find time in extra supply. In January of 1842 we find Thornwell writing to Breckinridge about the forthcoming Reply, and offering his diagnosis of the root of the matter.

South Carolina College, January 17, 1842

My Dear Brother:

I am sorry that my reply to Smyth's review will not be ready for the next number of your Magazine. I shall commence writing it to-morrow, and shall easily finish it in a week; so that you will receive it early next month. You may think me very slow in my motions; but I have been waiting for some books which I purchased in Europe, and which I have been expecting every day. They

---

[17]The same, p 228.

have not yet arrived; and wind and tide are so uncertain, that I do not know then they will arrive.

Some passages in the review have filled me with grief and amazement, and show but too plainly that the first principles of ecclesiastical polity are not clearly understood among us.

The fundamental fallacy of the whole production, and of the system which it is designed to uphold, is that the Church, instead of being the kingdom of the Lord Christ, is really one of His counsellors and His confidential agents.

This rotten principle is the basis of the whole fabric of discretionary power, and the multitude of inventions which have sprung from human prudence.[18]

The real trouble, Thornwell feels, lies even deeper, out in the church.

But I have no idea of troubling you with an argument here, of which you will have enough in due time. I am satisfied that what of all things we need most, is a revival of pure religion in all our churches. The cause of Missions lags, and all our interests decay, because the Spirit of Life, to a mournful extent, is withdrawn from our congregations.

The Church has almost dwindled down into a secular corporation; and the principles of this world, a mere carnal policy, which we have nick-named prudence, presides in our councils. Until she becomes a spiritual body, and aims at spiritual ends by appointed means, and makes faith in God the impulsive cause of her efforts, our Zion can never arise and shine, and become a joy and a praise in the whole earth.

It is my fervent prayer that God would bless us, and that right early. I am satisfied that our Church has a noble destiny to accomplish. With all her defects, I believe her to be the purest Church on earth; and as I am fully persuaded that our beloved country must take the lead, and that at no distant period, in the civilization of the world, I would fain hope, that the purest Church in our land will be particularly prominent in

---

[18]The same, p 228. Additional paragraphing supplied.

> sending forth the waters of salvation, to gladden and fertilize the earth. Hence, I am earnestly desirous that she should be furnished for the enterprise to which I believe her to be called.
>
> In the hope, and with the earnest prayer, that God may be with you, and abundantly bless you, I am
>
> Your sincere friend,
>
> J. H. Thornwell.[19]

In forwarding the manuscript on February 7th, Thornwell is sorry that he has had to confine himself to a mere reply to Smyth's arguments. "I should have liked to enter into a full and positive indication of my own principles, but my article would have been too outrageously protracted." He hopes that he has said nothing offensive or unchristian --- "If I have, please strike it out." What Thornwell wishes most of all, is that Breckinridge would follow up the lead of his footnote postscript to Smyth's last installment. "I wish you would take up Boards on the ground of experience, and show how little they have really accomplished. I have not the details which are necessary for an argument of this sort."[20]

The next suggestion is typical to the core of James Henley Thornwell. No man could be more conscious of what happened in the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia of 1840, when his own and Smyth's views came before the court at the same time, alternative to each other. Yet now he is ready to try it again. Thornwell believes that the courts of the Presbyterian Church are the place where men should face their alternatives squarely, out in the open.

---

[19] The same, pp 228-229.

[20] The same, p 229.

> The thought has occurred to me, that the next General Assembly ought to appoint a committee, to take the whole question of Boards into consideration, and report to the succeeding Assembly. Let the committee consist of men on both sides, and let two reports go up, bringing the whole matter fully before the body. Something must be done. I trust my article may be in time for the March number.
>
> In great haste, I am your sincere friend and brother,
>
> J. H. Thornwell[21]

In this brief letter, written privately to a close personal friend who was a proven political organizer and leader in the crossfires of Presbyterian Church politics, we see something which those who knew him and worked with him through the years felt was one of the keys to Thornwell's character. Here is no intriguer, no manipulator looking for the levers of power, to put his program through.

How, we may ask, -- children of an age in the Presbyterian church when our own bright young men have carefully chosen another way of doing business, the way equally popular with our bright young men in secular politics, and proven to their own satisfaction and the bafflement of their opponents that anything is possible to those who know what they want the church to do, who know how to organize their strength at the key crossroads of effective control so as to deliver the votes wherever and whenever the choices are made, -- how was this brilliant and single-minded Presbyterian minister, in all respects commanding in stature enough that his church

---

[21] J[ames] H[enley] Thornwell from South Carolina College to Robert J[efferson] Breckinridge in Baltimore, February 7, 1842, as carried in B[enjamin] M[organ] Palmer, The Life and letters of James Henley Thornwell, D. D. LL. D., p 229.

elected him Moderator of its General Assembly at the age of 34, the youngest moderator the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America has ever called to that chair -- brilliant, dedicated, alert, aware, how was James Henley Thornwell able to miss the one sure avenue to having his own way with the church?

> One secret of this is found[, says his close friend, co-worker and biographer Benjamin Morgan Palmer, in another connection, --- one secret of this is found] in the fact, that his principles of action were all settled.
>
> They were not left to be gathered up in the hurry of an emergency, amid the dust and strife of debate. They were antecedently determined, and no temptation could induce him to swerve from their maintenance. No man was ever less under the guidance of mere expediency than he, whether the question related to the private intercourse of man with man, or ranged upon a higher scale in matters of public policy.
>
> None saw more clearly that so shifting a rule as that of expediency could never prescribe an even or consistent course. He fixed therefore for himself, finally and for ever, the great principles of private and public morality, and these were his guides through every labyrinth of doubt.
>
> In this is found the capital distinction between the statesman and the politician: the one starts out with catholic and fundamental principles, which determine his entire course; the other floats upon the currents of events, is borne off into every eddy, and reflects little else but the changefulness of popular opinion. The former may sometimes err in the application of his canons to particular cases; but he has the means of correcting his own aberrations, and will preserve a manly consistency through all the changes of a public career.[22]

Palmer was younger, and knew Thornwell first while under him as his student --- a far more critical and intimate

---

[22]Palmer, Life of JHT, p 559.

vantage-point for insight and assessment than most teachers realize, having forgotten swiftly and mercifully the razor's edge of the students' pooled appraisal of their faculty. He knew him later as friend and companion in church and home, in Presbytery and editorial endeavor. He describes Thornwell as a man of force and influence, but of a force and influence built on an entirely different foundation from that chosen by those who study Michiavelli and politics and the web of power based on astute, even brilliant, manipulation and control.

> [T]he moral quality which more than all contributed to his vast influence, [Palmer wrote,] was the transparent honesty of his heart.
>
> He was no intriguer; had no by-ends to accomplish; never worked by indirection. His heart was in his hand, and every man could read it.
>
> When he rose in debate, his very tone seemed to say, "I believed, therefore I have spoken." None doubted his sincerity, or suspected a trap to catch the unwary. Straightforward himself, he dealt honestly with his colleagues; and if he could not carry his point by fair argument, he was content to fail.[23]

This quality was not one forced on him by the hard facts of unconvinced majorities beyond the reach of his persuasion. It was at the heart of the man, as this telling testimony from the most potentially abraded post in the Presbyterian church makes clear. We are listening to Thornwell's former student and [later] junior co-pastor Francis P. Mullally:

> Among the things by which Dr. Thornwell was distinguished, to me, his respect for his fellow men was not the least remarkable. He honoured all men; respected man as man; reverenced mind, in whatever form or stage of progress it appeared. I never knew him to interrupt a student while endeavouring, or even pretending, to answer a question. The response might be no

---

[23]The same, p 561.

> matter how far from the point, or blundering; might evidently invite interruption as a means of escape from painful exposure; yet would it have his unrippled attention till it came to a close. ...
>
> In our co-pastorate he manifested the same trait very fully. He always made me feel that he gave any views presented by me as much attention as if they had been urged in person by the most distinguished and experienced Presbyter in the land. Probably the best exemplification of this was his yielding to me, in reference to a form for the admission of converts into the Church which he had prepared, to the extent of erasing more than half the questions it originally contained. What made this the more remarkable was, that he had undertaken to defend the propriety of asking such questions, and that he gave way after we had debated the matter. Though he had the strength of a giant, he did not use it as a giant.[24]

Breckinridge acknowledged the receipt of the manuscript, and in doing so evoked one of those revealing personal unfoldings of the mind from his friend which are the joy of those who have correspondents who think out loud on paper. Here we see beyond the formalities of the public debate to the inner interests and intentions of the debater as he speaks to a close and trusted friend. As we read what Thornwell wrote to Breckinridge in late February of 1842, we find out why it is that he devotes so little space and attention to a formal structure of his own design to replace the General Assembly Board structure, and what his basic concern is -- what it is that lies behind and gives drive to his thoughts about the Boards.

"My Dear Brother," he wrote to Breckinridge from South Carolina College on the 23rd, "I received your letter this morning, acknowledging the receipt of my manuscript, and of the letter which succeeded it."

---

[24]The same, p 565.

> In regard to a central agency, I have expressed no opinion, because my object has chiefly been to awaken our Presbyteries to a proper sense of their own responsibilities. Whenever they shall undertake, in good earnest, the work of the Lord, in conformity with the spirit of our system, the details of their plans will not be found, I apprehend, very hard to settle.[25]

Continuing his letter, Thornwell starts out on a train of thought from a simple pragmatic fact:

> On the present plan, our churches are not reached.

He has a high ideal of Christian corporate effort in God's work, and he finds the present system coming short when measured by it:

> The whole body is not, and cannot be[,] engaged as one man [under the present Board and Agency system].

Thornwell as a Presbyterian minister has subscribed to a method of church government which is expressly designed to furnish a corporate bond of union beyond the local associations of Christians; but the present Board and Agency system pays no attention to it:

> The principles of our polity, by which we are bound together and united into one body, are set aside [under the present Board and Agency system].

Independents, those Christians who place all church government in the local congregation and admit no organic, governmental bond between congregations gathered into one system over an area, have a "lame and crippled constitution" and for lack of the Presbyterian system of ascending councils have no choice in united benevolent work but to set up "this

---

[25]The same, pp 229-230.

clumsy method" of Boards and Agents.[26]

But our system gives us a more excellent way to reach all our churches and to engage the whole body as one organic, integrated man, than any system of Boards and Agents can offer.

> This clumsy method I wish to see abandoned; I want our distinctive principles clearly brought out; and I am very indifferent as to the details by which this may be done, so that it is effectually done.[27]

This is close to the heart of Thornwell's central position. He is not a man with a hidden agenda consisting of some new agency structure to replace the Board structure. He is a man who sees the existing structure of the Presbyterian church, with her representative assemblies of ministers and elders, as intimately involved with every church and with every man, established for the specific purpose of finding out higher wisdom and supervising what needs to be supervised. His objection to the Boards is (1) because they have a dismal record, measured against the potential of the church, and (2) because they positively prevent, by their existence and by their actions, the Presbyterian bond and basis of connection between congregations from working.

Against a central agency as such, merely because it is central, he has no objection:

> If a central agency can be suggested, which shall give us a proper security against error and abuse, and interfere with the regular operations of no part of our system, I shall have not a word to say against it.[28]

---

[26]The underlined and quoted material is from the same, p 230.

[27]Palmer, Life of JHT, p 230.

[28]The same.

Thornwell was faithful to attend the meetings of his Presbytery. No one who is familiar with Presbyteries, whether by regular attendance or by the study of their minutes of any age, is under illusions about them. As ecclesiastical courts they command the attendance of all of the Presbyterian church's full-time ministerial leadership, and of busy, hard-working elders who have a living to earn and a world's affairs to keep running. What, one might ask, and evidently Thornwell did ask himself on more than one occasion, are the concerns which should occupy the minds of men specially set apart to bring the gospel to a lost world? What are the concerns which should require professional men, doctors and dentists and lawyers, to desert their practice and part of their income, teachers to abandon their classes, farmers to take eye and hand off their crops, salesmen to give up calls and commissions, workmen to give up full days of their jobs and the wages attached, all to make regular trips to meet with the men who are specially set apart to bring the gospel to a lost world?

> I deplore bitterly that our ecclesiastical courts, to such a mournful extent, have ceased to be spiritual bodies, and degenerated into hewers of wood and drawers of water. Our business is, for the most part, purely secular; and when we have nothing of this sort to engage our attention, we are apt to complain that we have no business; are impatient to adjourn and return home; though a world is lying in wickedness, and millions are perishing daily for lack of knowledge.
>
> Our courts must be roused up to a just sense of their true relation to our dying race; they must be brought to feel the spiritual nature of their vocation, and to appreciate the work which they are required to do in the vineyard of the Lord.
>
> This deplorable state of things the Boards have a tendency to engender and perpetuate. And on this

---

[29]The same.

> account, apart from all other considerations, I must regard them as an incubus upon the body.[29]

This is the root of James Henley Thornwell's dissatisfaction with what he found in the church. As his private journals show, he was in the Presbyterian ministry because he believed that the whole world and all people in it are lying in wickedness, perishing daily for lack of knowledge of the good news that God had so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.[30] He had begun by believing this with his mind; he had come to feel the force of it in his heart.[31]

At the age of sixteen he had instinctively given up the dearest thing in life, and the promise of love, education and a career in law, where all who knew him were certain that his gifts would in time command him whatever he chose which the nation had to offer, rather than turn aside from the path

---

[30] Consult the MSS devotional journal of Thornwell's early days in the Presbyterian ministry at Lancaster, South Carolina, in the Thornwell Collection, the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina, samples of which are given in Palmer, Life of JHT, pp 139-144; and the Shipboard Journal (1841) of James Henley Thornwell, in the Thornwell Papers, the South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, South Carolina, excerpts from which are given in Palmer, Life of JHT, pp 160-166.

[31] See Palmer, Life of JHT, pp 83-101; the struggling passages of his early journal compared with the maturing passages of his shipboard journal; and the correspondence with his wife, a considerable body of which is in the South Caroliniana Library but which Palmer omits, having indicated its general nature and given examples from time to time.

which, still hidden to the eye, was leading him towards the ministry.[32]

At the age of twenty-one he had entered what in the Presbyterian church is called the gospel ministry. He took the title seriously.[33]

Called to teach in the central academic institution of his state, and being found a successful teacher, he left the promise of a brilliant academic career to return to the pastorate because he felt in the bone of him that as a minister of the gospel he had responsibility to a dying world which no professor of Belles Lettre or of Metaphysics could put his whole time and life into.[34]

He returned to the campus only when he was invited to fill the chair of Sacred Literature and the Evidences of Christianity, and serve as campus minister to the student body;[35] once more he accepted the call of a congregation

---

[32]The full account of this incident, given by Palmer in The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, pp 46-50, is difficult to read, even for those familiar with it, without tears. "As [these views] have come upon me again with increased power," Thornwell said in the note he left by Harold Robbins's plate,

> I feel it a duty to reveal them to you. If you think they are erroneous, illustrate their error. If this is not done, I am compelled to bid farewell, with great heaviness of heart, to a beloved patron, who kindly clothed me when naked, fed me when hungry, and, above all, has much laboured to dispel ignorance from my mind; a beloved patron, whose name is music to my ears, one whom I can never forget, and of whom I will ever think with the liveliest emotions of gratitude[. Pp 47-48.]

[33]See Palmer, Life of JHT, pp 127-144.

[34]See Palmer, Life of JHT, pp 145-155.

[35]The same, pp 155-156.

because of his intense conviction that a minister of the gospel should put full time on the gospel; and when the state held him for a year in the letter of the law, unwilling to give him up any sooner than the fine print of regulation would require after his formal resignation, his Presbytery stepped in and in the interests of religion held him to the campus.[36]

Finally making his second escape from the campus to the pastorate again under the entreaties of a congregation, he returned to "this dungeon" of University life only when all those close to him insisted that his accepting the election to the Presidency of the South Carolina College was too important to the Christian life of the state and her future leaders for him to refuse.[37]

Seeing that the system for seeking the will of God, Presbytery, which he embraced, had concluded with the State that the will of God and man for him was to serve on the campus, a life he found filled with a thousand tyrranizing distractions, he left the highest academic post a State can offer, and went to the one place where a professor who was a minister of the gospel might, if he chose, devote all his time and strength to gospel thoughts and gospel enterprizes: the seminary campus.[38]

This was the personal expression in life of the conviction James Henley Thornwell was expressing to Robert Jeffer-

---

[36]The same, pp 267-284. "The record is of value," says Palmer with some satisfaction, "as showing that Presbyterianism is a government, and the Church courts are something more than advisory councils." (p 284)

[37]The same, pp 338-353.

[38]Palmer, Life of JHT, pp 381-383.

son Breckinridge on February 23, 1842, when he wrote, "Our [Presbyterian church] courts [of Session, Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly] must be roused up to a just sense of their true relation to our dying race; they must be brought to feel the spiritual nature of their vocation, and to appreciate the work which they are required to do in the vineyard of the Lord"[39]

Because the Boards, though isolating in their small corner the great benevolent interests of Bible dissemination and Christian literature and Sunday School development and ministerial recruitment and evangelistic work at home and abroad, managed to created the illusion that all the church, head and members, were at work in these things; and because the Boards, by loading down the church courts with the good work of serving tables, diverted the courts from their true genius and responsibility, Thornwell wrote to his friend, "I must regard them as an incubus on the body."[40] "[So,]" he continued,

> when you combine with their dangerous results their unsoundness of principle, I cannot see how any true hearted Presbyterian can give them his sanction.
>
> I must again urge you to expose, more fully than you have done, their inefficiency. Do join issue with their advocates, upon the plain matter of fact, and show that they have not accomplished what they were established to do; that, in sober truth, they are an utter failure, as agents of the Church. This you can do, and I cannot.[41]

Thornwell loved theory. His mind was made for it; but he knew the workings of the minds of other men, most of whom

---

[39] Palmer, Life of JHT, p 230.

[40] The same.

[41] Palmer, Life of JHT, p 230.

take aboard a vast freight of theory unconsciously and feel it an imposition to be asked to stir it up, sort through it, take stock and inventory, making one column for wheat, a separate column for chaff. He knew what was needed: facts; and he knew who had them on hand in abundance for immediate application.

> I have not the facts: and a method of reasoning like this would be ten-fold more effective than all the abstract arguments that could be produced from now till dooms-day. It would absolutely demolish them[.][42]

A careful student in his own profession of what is required of an institution, Thornwell was perfectly aware of what the constant series of reports from the Boards did at every meeting of Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly. Organizations with such a poor statistical record, he knew, "stand only by creating the impression that the Church can, by no manner of means, get along without them."[43]

Breckinridge was delighted to have the Reply to the Review of the Calm Discussion. In April it was in print in his Spirit of the XIX. Century.

It is the lead article.

---

[42]The same.

[43]The same.

THORNWELL REPLIES TO A SERIOUS REVIEW

In publishing the rejoinder to Thomas Smyth which he had led his readers to expect, Robert Jefferson Breckinridge of Baltimore seems to have set a record for title infelicity, North American Literature Division, Department of the House that Jack Built. James Henley Thornwell's further thoughts on the Board and Agency system of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America made its way to the Spirit of the XIX. Century's constituency under the heading

> Reply to A "Serious Review of a 'Calm Discussion of the Lawfulness, Scripturalness and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Boards,' Being a Defence of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church;' --- by the Author of the Calm Discussion.[1]

After a courteous word of appreciation to the Review, which he had guessed (as we have seen)[2] was from the pen of Thomas Smyth whom in deference to the customs of the times he nowhere mentions by name, Thornwell summarizes his main ground and then gives us a perceptive passage on what he

---

[1] Until further notice, quotations are taken from the article named here, in the Spirit of the XIX. Century, I:4, April 1842, pp 145-166.

[2] See above, p 190.

recognizes as the only practical basis for enlisting Christian support of missionary and benevolent enterprize.

> I am glad that this Review has given me the opportunity of appearing again in defence of the venerable Standards of the Presbyterian church.
>
> Fully persuaded as I am, that those Standards contain the "mind of the spirit" upon the nature, extent and proper distribution of ecclesiastical power, and just as strongly assured that the system of action to which our church, in an evil hour, has lent the sanction of her name and authority, is subversive of her peculiar and characteristic principles of government and order; I must feel anxious to bring her back, so far as my efforts can be of any service, to her ancient platform, and to arrest the progress of those abuses, which, in a general decline of all true religion, had silently and imperceptibly crept in among us.
>
> The cause of missions will suffer nothing from a discussion conducted in the fear of God, and prompted by a single desire to glorify his name. Light is the friend of righteousness; and we never can expect the people of God to engage in any spiritual enterprize with interest and prayer unless its principles are addressed to their faith.[3]
>
> The great defect, as it strikes me, of all the missionary schemes of the day, is that the principles upon which they rely for success, their leading measures, the general plan upon which they are conducted, are addressed to the natural sympathies of men and not to the faith of the saints of the Most High.
>
> They are constructed in such a way as to conciliate public opinion in their favour and the great instrument of their succes[s] is the popularity of their measures, leading to liberal and handsome contributions. Take away from them the approbation and the money of the world, and they wither and die instantaneously. They have no principle of life in themselves.[4]

---

[3]Thornwell, "Reply," Spirit of the XIX. Century, I:4, April 1842, p 145. Additional paragraphing supplied; underlining added.

[4]The same, pp 145-146.

There was a time, says Thornwell, when the success of the Church in her commission was not dependent on the success of the surrounding world; it was a

> time when the rise and fall, the prosperity and decay of the kingdoms of this world were alike conducive to the advancement and success of that kingdom which the God of heaven had established in the midst of the earth[.] [T]here was a time when the church of God could grow and flourish and spread her conquests far and wide in the midst of scorn, persecution and reproach, and when she expected nothing from the world but its malice, and asked for nothing but to be patiently heard.
>
> These golden days have either passed away, or those institutions, which live only in the breath of the public approbation, are radically wrong.[5]

Christians who are interested in the work, like Board Secretaries who are interested in the work, are distressed at the fluctuations in support. Thornwell has an answer:

> If we would be alike prosperous and alike independent of the fluctuations and vicissitudes of this world's interests, we must return to the simplicity of faith; and as no institutions can address themselves to the faith of God's people, but those which are founded upon God's word, (for the word is the measure and the standard of faith,) we must abandon all the expedients of human wisdom, which in spiritual matters, ever has been and ever will be folly --- we must despise the elements of carnal policy which, however conducive to success in the affairs of this world, brings nothing but disgrace and defeat in the affairs of the church --- and we must confine ourselves simply to what God has sanctioned --- and rely for success upon his promises[;] and just as far as his favour transcends in importance the applause of men, and his Spirit excels in efficacy the cooperation of mortals, so far may we hope, that the success of

---

[5]The same, p 146. Students of the history of the churches and their Boards are familiar with the laments, in annual report and General Assembly, which follow the cycle of prosperity and recession in the land.

> scriptural measures will exceed the success of our present contrivances.[6]

Thornwell welcomes discussion. It is what God has given man for the cure of blind zeal, than which "nothing is more dangerous."[7] Consequently, if the ends and principles of our benevolent operations are found to be wrong,

> we know that the cause of God will suffer nothing, but gain much from the total destruction of every Board connected with the church --- if they are found to be right, we can support them with a conscience void of offence towards God and towards men.[8]

What he wants is "a full, thorough and candid discussion" of the whole subject; it will help "the prosperity of missions both at home and abroad...." He is seeking the welfare of Zion -- and that includes

> exerting every nerve and making every lawful effort to dispossess the strangers that are defiling the sanctuary and defacing the carved work of the city of our God.[9]

Let the reader suspend judgment, Thornwell asks, until he has seen all the arguments and thought them through. A radical who is going to roots to seek radical solutions, he holds no brief for the status quo and is open to any new truth no matter how unforeseen. During a search for truth, he says, we shall be "indifferent as to <u>what</u> may be proved to be true, but earnest and fixed when the truth has been discovered."[10]

---

[6]The same.

[7]The same, p 147.

[8]The same.

[9]The same.

[10]The same, p 148.

First, Thornwell begins, let us consider the charge of extremism. His opponent the Reviewer, a master of rhetoric, obviously intends to smear Thornwell his objector with the epithet of ultraism. But this is "a charge which must always be unmeaning until the extremes are accurately defined, and the middle path clearly pointed out."[11] Words are the coin of fools; does the reviewer know what class of Scotland's sons are called moderate?[12] But what is my ultraism? The Reviewer contends, that latitudinarianism -- the support of voluntary Societies -- is one extreme; and that ultraism -- maintaining that the church of Jesus Christ is the true instrument for converting the world -- is the other extreme;

> while the middle path of safety and of truth is to be found in supporting ecclesiastical corporations.
>
> Now, for aught that I can see to the contrary, it is just as safe to make voluntary associations the extreme of latitudinarianism, ecclesiastical corporations the extreme of ultraism, and the church of God, as organized by her glorious Head, the true middle between them.
>
> I have noticed this sly and artful introduction, because with many minds it may have the force of a negative argument. The question of voluntary associations is settled among us --- to assert, therefore, that the opponents of Boards are just on the opposite extreme, will produce in some, the calm and settled conviction that the friends of Boards are just what they ought to be. Their neighbours are all wrong, and as they are not like them, therefore, they must be right.
>
> Many a conclusion has been obstinately supported by no better reasoning than this.[13]

---

[11] The same.

[12] This is a sharp reprimand to the orthodox Smyth, and Thornwell develops it so that the point cannot be missed.

[13] "Reply," Spirit of the XXIX. Century, I:4, April 1842, pp 148-149.

This is Thornwell the logician in operation, earning the reputation for which he was famous in two hemispheres.

As Thornwell continues, an interesting insight emerges. In our day Thornwell has a reputation of conservatism, based partly on the generally unfounded assumption that whatever is of former days must be conservative, and partly because on the subject of slavery he was conservative from a national standpoint.[14] But from the standpoint of his own surroundings, as some investigators have been discovering, Thornwell was by no means conservative. In politics he was national, not sectional, from the moment his first enthusiastic voice and pen were raised against nullification until his native state was already irrevocably on her way out of the Union, to be retrieved only by the bitterest of wars. His secular political views were at every point the opposite of those of the archetype of Southern conservative political power players of his time, John C. Calhoun. Thornwell's theological positions now seem conservative in the extreme; but then so do those of Albert Barnes his contemporary, the liberal preacher and theologian of the New School, the Henry Pitney Van Dusen of his times. Measured against the issues of their day, Thornwell was on the liberal side of question after question in the church. He was for the expanded dignity and authority of the ruling elder, against the traditional clerical elevation of the ordained ministers to priestly pre-

---

[14]For a discussion in this context of problems in the identification of moral blindness in the self and in institutions close to the self, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration..., pp 243-245. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[15]This footnote number not used.

eminence in ritual and status.[16] He was for the promotion of physical science as fit associate of religion in the mental and philosophical orientation of the modern, thinking Christian.[17] He was for the popularist concept of the limitation of centralized power; and in this he was very much the heir of the American revolutionaries, who were profoundly concerned with the problem of limiting the arbitrary or tyrranical exercise of power by central power structures, their incumbents and their agents.

His position in the Boards controversy should be read in this context; and the above is only a preliminary list.

In attempting to assess the liberalism or conservatism of a position in the period, as an example it is interesting to look at the votes on the elder question in a Presbytery like Harmony, which will attract our attention before long in another connection.

The conservative position was to continue to exclude elders from the laying on of hands by Presbytery at ordinations, and to allow Presbyteries and Synods to have a quorum and transact business with only ministers present. The vote came on whether or not to enlarge the position and power of

---

[16] The raw material for these observations is contained in various places in Palmer, Life of JHT; in the Collected Writings of JHT; and may be seen in part by a survey of the titles of his published articles and essays.

[17] The establishment of the first chair in a theological seminary which linked science and religon in a deliberately positive manner received Thornwell's hearty support and cooperation. See Theodore Dwight Bozeman, "Science, Nature and Society: A New Approach to James Henley Thornwell," pp 306-325, in Journal of Presbyterian History, 50;4, Winter 1972. This took place at Columbia Seminary; the views of Princeton on such matters were antediluvian by comparison.

elders by requiring their presence as a part of the required quorum, whether in business sessions or at ordinations. But Thornwell was <u>for</u> the change, and his writing on the Elder question is among his most vigorous.[18]

We shall do well to be cautious, therefore, in accepting uncritically the current assumption of the parochial 1970s that Thornwell was a conservative. As Thornwell remarks,

> There is great danger...in taking things for granted, and hence I would urge my brethren to [investigate these matters] with that cautious suspense of judgment which is indispensably required in the search after truth, and which is equally removed from partiality to any set of opinions on the one hand, and to indolence of understanding on the other.[19]

The force of our suggestion, that Thornwell is not so easily classified as a conservative, may be seen as we consider his opening statements in direct rebuttal of Thomas Smyth's argument that because the objector's proposals constitute a novelty, the presumption is that they are wrong.

This position of Smyth's, of course, is the classic conservative view. Thornwell's is the revolutionary's view and the liberal's view:

> Granting, then, that the presumption exists [says Thornwell,] --- it <u>proves</u> nothing, but only throws upon me the necessity of proving my point --- but, in fact, no such presumption exists....
>
> [L]et it be remembered that a presumption of the same kind existed against Christianity, when its doc-

---

[18]MSS <u>Minutes</u> of Harmony Presbytery, 1843-1845, at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina; Thornwell, <u>Collected Writings</u> IV, pp 43-142.

[19]"Reply," pp 147-148.

> trines were first promulgated, and against the reformation of Luther, when he first commenced to testify against the iniquities of Rome.
>
> The only effect of such a presumption is to thrown the burden of proof upon those who assail institutions.
>
> Whatever positive force it possesses depends upon the probability that whatever is settled must be right, or that institutions sanctioned by prescription must necessarily be founded in reason.
>
> It is an argument which may be pleaded just as strongly in defence of abuses as in behalf of righteousness, and, therefore, as an argument, it is absolutely worthless.[20]

Next, Thornwell moves to clear up a basic misconception which runs throughout the Review of the Calm Discussion. It is a singular mistake to imagine, he says,

> that in the Calm Discussion a scheme was proposed separate and distinct from the provisions of our book. A leading object of that article was to deny the right of devising schemes at all, and to confine the church within the limits of Divine prescription. It takes for granted that the plan developed in our standards is agreeable to the word of God, and labours to bring back the churches to a cordial adoption of its principles.[21]

In this sense, of course, Thornwell is taking a conservative position; unless, and it is an important unless, he is right in asserting that the schemes devised are not only unauthorized by the book, but also positively injurious to peace, safety, liberty and prosperity in the church. If the new schemes of ecclesiastical Boards have a fatal effect, then the liberal position is to reform and get rid of them.

---

[20] The same, p 149. Paragraphing added

[21] The same.

To cling to them, as Thornwell's opponents did and do, is the conservative position.

Still, if Smyth's arguments that innovation is inherently suspicious carry weight with Smyth's readers, Thornwell is happy to suggest another reading of the situation. If the originators, continuers and supporters of church Boards

> can produce no sanction of their measures from the word of God or the standards of the church --- the bond of our ecclesiastical connection --- we have a right to complain of them as innovators and troublers.[22]

But this only preliminary.

In a passage essential to his position in answering the arguments Smyth made against the objectors to ecclesiastical Boards, Thornwell pins down a basic difference in presuppositions between the two standpoints.

"I was astounded," Thornwell says, "at his declaration ...that neither the Scriptures nor our Standards are decisive authority with him." He quotes over half a page from Smyth, concluding with the key wording. Smyth has said that the opponents of Boards must not only establish successfully against the system a charge of unscripturality and unconstitutionality, they must also show that the system necessarily leads to evils, and

> "must further provide a system of means by which the end, which, as they allow, must be attained, can be accomplished.
>
> "This system of theirs, they must show is free from all similar difficulties and objections --- is not liable to similar abuses, and is, in itself, scriptural, Presbyterial and expedient.
>
> "All this our objectors are under obligations to

---

[22]The same, p 149. Italics added.

> do before they can fairly call upon us to abandon the existing system and to endanger an end of such necessary and transcendant importance."[23]

Thornwell's reaction to this is basic to the difference between the two men on the issue.

> It seems, then, that even if the Boards should be proved to be unscriptural, and in dangerous opposition to the standards of the church, their friends cannot be called on to abandon them until a better system is actually provided.[24]

That, as we know from having followed Smyth's "Review" closely and in detail, is a fair statement of Smyth's reiterated position. Thornwell is appalled.

> No matter if God forbids them, we are bound to uphold them until it can be shown that the scriptural plan is really the best.
>
> And what are those mighty arguments in favour of the Boards, which can silence the voice of God and annul our covenanted engagements as members of the Presbyterian church? Why, they have "been sanctioned by adoption, by long trial, and, as is believed, by eminent success."
>
> These weighty considerations, which can be pleaded in defence of every abuse under heaven, which apply just as strongly to the propaganda at Rome --- the inquistion in Spain, and the infernal butcheries of Mahomet, as they do to the boards of the Presbyterian church, are gravely brought forward to drown the voice of inspiration, and to silence the clamours of those who are zealous for the Lord God of Hosts.
>
> Oh tell it not in Gath. Publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon![25]

---

[23] The same, p 150, quoting Smyth's "Review of 'A Calm Discussion...,'" in The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine for 1841, p 459-460.

[24] The same, p 150.

[25] The same.

Thornwell hopes that there are still those who "will require no stronger argument in favor of 'a more excellent way' than that it is both scriptural and Presbyterian --- being fully assured that whatever plan God has prescribed he will certain bless."[26]

We have observed that Smyth laid out his strength on the proposition that imposition of a duty implies authority to use whatever means are necessary for fulfillment of the duty. The centrality of this assertion to Smyth's argument did not escape Thornwell's eye.

> If I can show that this principle is false, [Thornwell says,] unsupported by scripture and condemned by our creed, my task will be done, and every additional argument that I may choose to advance will be ex abundanti --- over and above what can strictly be required of me.
>
> This principle [of the Reviewer's] is, that the church, to a certain extent, is the confidential agent of her Divine Head --- invested with discretionary powers, and left to the resources of her own wisdom.[27]

In Smyth's words, Thornwell says, it comes out in this form:

> The reviewer lays it down as an axiom --- that where duties are required, the necessary powers to discharge them are conveyed --- if not directly, at least by implication[,][28]

and he proceeds to quote the Reviewer to this effect in passages we are familiar with from our earlier analysis of

---

[26]The same, pp 150-151.

[27]The same, p 151.

[28]The same.

the three installments of Smyth's defense of the Boards.[29]

Pausing to quash the ad captandum expressions Smyth used, especially in denouncing the objector's position as Judaical, -- Thornwell notes that the freedom of the gospel is from the Old Testament ceremonial law, not from the commandment and example of Christ and the Apostles[30] -- he goes on to insist that though the Christian is free from what God required only of his Old Testament people, what is his duty is as strictly enjoined on him as the Jews' duties were on them.[31]

Smyth's appeal to Calvin strikes Thornwell as futile -- "the passages quoted have no bearing upon the subject at all -- they might as well have been adduced to prove that there are inhabitants in the moon."[32]

Owen is a different matter. In Thornwell's reading of the Owen material brought in by Smyth, it goes directly against the reviewer. Thornwell will return to Owen, but first he wants to deal with Smyth's indirect argument. It is

> every thing in the shape of reasoning, that I can find in his two last articles, [and amounts] to this --- God has required of the church certain duties, without furnishing her with the means of performing them; upon the principle that where duties are commanded, the necessary power is conveyed --- she is at liberty to divise the means for herself.
>
> The whole force of this reasoning depends upon the proposition that God has not furnished the church with

---

[29] see above, pp 161-163.

[30] "Reply," pp 151-152.

[31] The same, p 152.

[32] The same, p 153.

> the apparatus of means for doing all that he has required.[33]

Here, as we noted earlier when reading the Review, is the crux of the matter. Thornwell sees it as such in much the same way.

> In other words, the real point at issue between the reviewer and myself is --- whether the church as organized by Jesus Christ and his apostles is <u>competent</u> to do all that her Head has enjoined upon her, or does she require additional agents to assist her?
>
> This is the real question, did Christ give the church all the furniture she needed, or did he partially supply her, with a general direction to make up the deficiency? Upon this question, I fearlessly join issue.[34]

If there is any doubt in our minds as to how much weight Thornwell attaches to this point, it is immediately settled:

> So strong are my convictions of the adequacy of the church as organized in the scriptures, to meet all exigencies, that if it can be clearly shown that she is incompetent to discharge any office assumed to be imperative upon her, I should think it much more probable that the duty was not enjoined, than that the church was thus relatively imperfect.
>
> What she clearly cannot do is not commanded.[35]
>
> The reviewer has evidently confounded --- and it is the source of all his error on the subject --- the acknowledged Protestant principle, that "there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature

---

[33] The same. Paragraphing supplied.

[34] The same.

[35] The same.

> and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed," (Confession of Faith, ch. I., sec. 6;) with the general doctrine, universally condemmed among all true Prostants, of discretionary power. Had he attended to the proper distinction upon this subject with is so clearly drawn by Calvin, and so unanswerably established by Owen, he might have spared himself the trouble of appealing to these illustrious men in behalf of his extravagant views of eccesiastical power.[36]

This point is basic to Thornwell's position. It early became cardinal for the reformers at the time of the Reformation, and continued cardinal for their heirs who were faced with the problems of consolidating or extending the territory it embraced, Thornwell can strengthen his case for many Presbyterians if he can show that Calvin and others are on his side.

Calvin, he thinks, is perfectly clear.

> I shall let Calvin speak for himself: --
>
> > We have, says he, an excellent and most certain mark, therefore, which distinguishes those impious constitutions by which it has been stated that true religion is obscured and men's consciences subverted, and the legitimate regulations of the church, which are always directed to one of those two ends, or to both together; that in the holy assembly of the faithful, all things may be conducted with suitable decorum and dignity, or that the community may be kept in order by the firm bonds of courtesy and moderation. (Institutes, Book IV., ch. 10, Sec. 28.)[38]

Calvin goes on to illustrate his two areas of dis-

---

[36]The same, pp 153-154.

[37]This footnote number not used.

[38]"Reply," p 154.

cretionary authority in the church: pomps are not included, but a "well regulated polity which excludes all confusion, incivility, obstinacy, clamours and dissensions," is. After more illustrations, Calvin sums up the position: "[a]ll the constitutions of the church which we receive as holy and useful, may be classed under two heads; some refer to rites and ceremonies, others to discipline and peace."[39]

> I approve[, Calvin adds,] of no human constitutions except such as are founded on the authority of God and deduced from the scripture, so that they may be considered as altogether Divine." [40]

Good, says Thornwell.

> The question concerning Boards is not a question of order and decorum.
>
> It is a question concerning a positive institution, which is itself to exercise this very discretion in regard to decency --- a question concerning a grave and important addition to the government of the church, and not about some circumstances common to human actions and societies.[41]

Calvin was an early reformer, meeting a multitude of questions and covering too much ground to devote detailed attention to this one point, important though it is. To have stated it clearly was sufficient. In England, however, the effort to purify the Church of England from Romish rites and practices brought it into additional prominence, and the Puritan divines had to formulate the position with care. Thomas Smyth having brought John Owen into the discussion,

---

[39] Institutes, Book IV, Chapter 10, Section 28, as quoted by James Henley Thornwell in his "Reply," p 154.

[40] The same, Section 30, as quoted in the same.

[41] "Reply," p 155.

because of his just reputation as the strictest of the strict, James Henley Thornwell is pleased to furnish us with Owen's mind on the matter.

> The essential difference between those "circumstances common to human actions and societies," which may be regulated by the "light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word," and those additions to the worship of God and government of the church, which all true Protestants have united in condemning, is thus clearly stated by Owen in his "Discourse concerning Liturgies" --- Works, vol. 19, p. 437, a discourse, which, mutatis mutandis, may just as conclusively be applied to Boards.
>
> "Circumstances," says [Owen], "are either such as follow actions as actions, or such as are arbitrarily superadded and adjoined by command unto actions, which do not of their own accord, nor naturally, nor necessarily attend them....There are also some things which some men call circumstances also, that no way belong of themselves to the actions whereof they are said to be the circumstances, nor do attend them, but are imposed on them or annexed unto them, by the arbitrary authority of those who take upon them to give orders and rules in such cases.
>
> These are not circumstances attending the nature of the thing itself, but are arbitrarily superadded to the things that they are appointed to accompany. Whatever men may call such additions, they are no less parts of the whole, wherein they serve, than the things themselves whereunto they are adjoined."
>
> Circumstances of this sort, to which Owen indeed denies the name, are according to him, unequivocally condemned in the word of God. He maintains the principle --- and what Presbyterian or Protestant can feel himself at liberty to deny it --- "that whatever is added, is contrary to what is commanded, though not in this or that particular commanded, yet to that command that nothing be added." Works, vol, 19, p. 444.[42]

---

[42]The same, pp 155-156.

In Thornwell's view this is perfectly clear, and is fatal to the notion that Boards lie within the discretionary power of the church.

> To bring Boards or ecclesiastical corporations within the principle admitted by Owen, the reviewer must show that they are circumstances necessarily attending the actions of ordaining ministers and sending them out to preach the gospel to every creature, considered merely as actions[;] and unless he can establish this point, the noble discourse of Owen bears just as hardly upon his favourite Boards as it does upon human liturgies.
>
> It fully coincides with the opinion expressed in the Calm Discussion, that the silence of the word of God concerning these inventions, seals their condemnation.[43]

The Puritan method of applying the Bible to the life of man was a primary intellectual tool of the Puritans in their soul-searching effort to arrive at a personal and corporate Christianity that might best serve God on earth. The farthest removed from a dead literalism, a vital Puritan exegetical principle was this: that Scripture teaches general principles by means of specific examples, not only of commandment, injunction, legislation, directive and advice, but also of narrative, exhortation and event.

As a method, no more penetrating has ever been devised. The ethic which emerges, as illustrated for example in the long series of questions in the Westminster Larger Catechism on the Ten Commandments, has never been surpassed. The method further provides for an equally penetrating application of Scripture to all aspects, public and private, of life in any age or place.

---

[43]The same, p 156.

The passage Thornwell has adduced from Owen is congruent with this general Puritan method, and an understanding and appreciation of the method is important to an understanding of what Thornwell is getting at in his insistence, with the Puritans, that what is not commanded for the church is forbidden. When Thornwell refers to "churchmen, prelatists and papists," he means those who historically have followed a different principle in the use of Scripture, applying Scripture as little as possible instead of as much as possible to the form, organization, structure, worship and teaching of the church.

> When the reviewer shall have proved that ecclesiastical corporations are mere "circumstances, concerning the worship of God and government of the church, common to human actions and societies," he may conscientiously sustain and support them without deserting Presbyterian principles for the extravagant pretensions of churchmen, prelatists and Papists.
>
> Let the reviewer consider carefully Owen's definition of circumstances, and his account of the real extent of discretionary power in ecclesiastical matters, and he will surely be constrained to acknowledge that he understood neither what he said nor whereof he affirmed when he ranted, at random, about a "dispensation of principles and not of rules."[44]

Thornwell's confidence in the divine authority of Presbyterian forms of government is not easily understood by those who like ourselves associate "Divine Right" notions with things so alien to us that we hardly feel enough real substance to them, even to reject them. We may analyze his meaning as follows. By the phrase "Divine Right" he does not mean a detailed divine prescription of specific legislation. He means that Jesus and the Apostles, in setting up the New Testament church with the officers described in the

---

[44]The same.

New Testament, doing the things the New Testament describes them as doing, were doing what the living God wanted done by and among Christians. If the Presbyterian form of church government follows the New Testament example -- has the officers the New Testament Church had, officers who do what their New Testament counterparts did, in churches related to each other as the New Testament churches were related to each other -- then it is following divine authority, divine prescription, rather than devising new officers and new patterns according to its own original inclinations or the original inclinations of others. Thornwell's confidence is complete in that New Testament form of church government, on which he believes that Presbyterian church government is modelled as closely as the state of the record will allow. (Thornwell is thoroughly read, in Greek, in the original sources, and is entirely familiar with the gray areas, ambiguities and problems posed by them). He makes his position clear:

> My faith in the Divine authority of our Presbyterian forms, is quite too strong to allow me, for a moment, to suppose that a rejection of the reviewer's preposterous dogma "would lay the axe to many a fair branch of our ecclesiastical polity, and leave a bare and barren trunk behind it --- that it would tie up the hands and feet of our sacred polity, and deprive it of all power of motion, or that it would emasculate it of all its strength and vigour, and reduce it to a helpless and exanimate system." --- Spirit of the XIX. Century, p. 27.

On the contrary, I sincerely believe that the following remarks, by an able reviewer of the Tracts for the Times, and other kindred publications, with the exception of the historical allusions, apply just as forcibly to the Presbyterian church in these United States, as to the Church of Scotland:

> It is not our smallest cause of gratitude to God as a church, that he has left us nothing to wish for or condemn in the constitution of our

church, as laid at the reformation.

All that is necessary is, that we fill up the outline which was then drawn, that we build upon the foundation which was then laid, that we carry out the principles which were then brought fresh and immediately from the word of God. She need invent nothing, displace nothing, alter nothing. Our reformed church was perfect in the economy of her creed, constitution, discipline and ritual.

All we require is, not to select among the institutions of modern innovators, or the antiquated relics of the middle ages.

We have but to return to the conditions in which our own church existed at the period of the first and second reformations, to find realized as pure and as perfect a transcript of apostolic church as can exist among uninspired men. This is an advantage which no other church can lay claim to.[45]

A more enthusiastic vote of confidence in the Presbyterian system of government has never been penned. Thornwell endorses it, as we see, without reservation. Twentieth Century Presbyterians in high positions in the larger branches of the Presbyterian Church, who would agree to this endorsement, would be hard to find.[46] But such an endorsement, coupled with a mind of a nature prepared as the Puri-

---

[45]The Presbyterian Review, Edinburgh, Number 55, p 619, footnote, as quoted by James Henley Thornwell, "Reply," p 156. Paragraphing supplied.

[46]A recent Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, asked in public how a minister subscribing to the Presbyterian form of government in his ordination vows could conscientiously recommend to his people the entry of the Presbyterian Church into the new body proposed by the COCU Consultation on Church Union, replied, "The sociologists tell us that although the different denominations on paper have different forms of government, in actual practice and function we all operate today along basically the

tans were prepared, to follow the consequences out in practice and through several steps of examining the consequences of consequences, may perhaps be a prerequisite for any adoption of James Henley Thornwell's basic position on ecclesiastical Boards in the Presbyterian Church.

Thornwell feels that he has "clearly detected and exposed the singular confusion of ideas which led the Reviewer" to bring in Calvin and the Confession of Faith, imagining that they were on the Reviewer's side.[47] Now he will proceed to the real issue as he understands it:

> Is the church adequately organized to discharge all the duties which Christ, her glorious Head and King, demands at her hands; or is she at liberty to supply the defects of her constitutions from the resources of her own wisdom?
>
> In other words --- Is the church simply a servant of Christ, bound to do what she is commanded, and as she is commanded, acting in all respects according to orders; or is she a confidential agent, instructed only as to the ends to be accomplished, and left to invent the means for herself?
>
> The reviewer and myself differ, and differ fundamentally as to the true relation in which the church stands to Christ.
>
> According to my views, the church is commissioned to teach men to observe all things whatsoever that Christ has commanded.
>
> According to the reviewer, she must add to the commandments of God, those wise expedients of her own, without which the commandments of God would be of none effect.[48]

---

same lines. In the real world of where we actually are, getting us together in a structure that reflects what we are all actually doing should not pose any great problems from the standpoint of church government."

[47] Thornwell, "Reply," p 157.

[48] The same. Additional paragraphing supplied.

"I might expose the fallacy of his principle" in a number of ways, Thornwell says, and cites several.[49] "It might be shown that he is at war with the whole spirit of Protestantism, and is making common cause with the friends of priestly intolerance and the foes of religious liberty throughout the world."[50] For Smyth, who like Breckinridge and Thornwell is an enthusiastic public opponent of Roman Catholic priests, bishops, and archbishops wherever they can be met in print, this will be an unpleasant suggestion.[51]

But Thornwell, in the spirit of the political orator who announces from the platform that he will not mention the fact that his opponent has been convicted twice for embezzlement, is under indictment for bigamy, and last Thursday made an appearance intoxicated on stage with a belly dancer, says that his "present purpose will be best subserved by omitting all considerations of this sort." He will instead show at once

> that the church is adequate to do, through her Divine organization, all that, in the Scriptures, is enjoined on her.
>
> In this way, the only earthly pretext for ecclesiastical corporations will be removed, and the last lingering tie that binds the hearts of our people to these idols of men will be severed --- I hope --- forever.
>
> As the work of foreign missions is confessedly the

---

[49]The same, p 157.

[50]The same, p 158.

[51]See Thomas Smyth, Presbytery and Not Prelacy the Scriptural and Primitive Polity. New York: Robert Carter, 1843. For much more, consult Thomas Smyth, Works. The best treatment of Smyth's Romanist controversies is found in Thomas Erskine Clark's dissertation, Thomas Smyth: Moderate of the Old South.

> most difficult enterprize with which the church is entrusted, if it can be shown that she is perfectly competent to conduct this department of labour without foreign assistance, extraneous agencies will hardly be demanded for any other part of her duty.[52]

What, then, does Scripture enjoin on the church?

First, "men must be called to the ministry...." When they give satisfactory evidence to the church "that they are called of God and duly prepared to preach the glorious gospel, this fact is declared by the imposition of hands, which the Presbytery alone can do.

"We have now the preachers"[53]

Second,

> [T]he next business is to send them, that is, to support them by supplying their daily wants in their respective fields of labour. The money must be raised in the separate congregations, and the scriptures have appointed a set of officers who are ordained for the very purpose of attending to the secular afairs of the church.[54]

Thornwell is accurately aware of where the money has to comes from.

Third,

> When you have raised the money, the next step is to send it to the preachers, which with the commercial facilities afforded by the present condition of the civilized world, can surely be no hard matter.[55]

---

[52]Thornwell, "Reply," p 158.

[53]The same. Thornwell is a careful writer. At ordination Presbytery conveys no magic, mystique nor even office, but recognizes God's call to the man, and the adequacy of the man's preparation to fulfill the call, and declares it by the public imposition of hands upon him.

[54]The same, p 158.

[55]The same.

This is no longer the cadence of the scholastic. We are listening to Thornwell the popular back-country preacher who would wear himself out preaching in evangelistic meetings for country churches and their pastors.

"The Holy Spirit, then, supplies us with preachers, the Presbytery ordains them," the deacons of the church collect the money and support them:

> What more is required? In what respects is this arrangement defective or inadequate?
>
> The character, qualifications and control of the minister belong, of right, to the Presbytery, and when they send him out, they are furnished in every congregation with the necessary organization for supplying his wants. This is a plain and simple matter, and evidently requires none of the cumbrous and circuitous arrangements which characterize the Boards.[56]

"This is certainly the plan, and the only plan, contemplated by our Form of Government," Thornwell concludes. Why then propose to depart from it? He quotes Smyth at length, giving "the pith of his whole argument --- if argument it may be called which arrives at conclusions without any premises at all." The quotation is elaborate and fair, and includes Smyth's review of the details involved in the work of the Boards so that, in Smyth's words, "for the wise management of these operations, a permanent body of some kind, entrusted with discretionary powers, is absolutely necessary."[57] But to Thornwell's mind a proof does not come by assertion:

> Now this whole paragraph, which was intended to show the insufficiency of the plan proposed in our

---

[56]The same, p 158. Paragraphing supplied.

[57]The same, pp 158-159.

> book, contains nothing but a statement of the various details of the work to be done.
>
> The question still returns, why cannot the Presbyteries accomplish this work just as efficiently as the Boards? The first thing wanted is good and faithful preachers --- a "continually increasing supply of good and faithful ministers." Now can Boards make them?[58]

Smyth, we gather from having now twice read his key argument that the details require a Board, was thinking about the myriad administrative details which occupy administrative offices. Whatever it is in the Board Rooms that the Secretaries and their staffs are doing, that is obviously something that no General Assembly or Presbytery can be doing in between its sessions.

Thornwell, by contrast, is not thinking about administrative detail work, large and small, as created and performed by an administrative body set up for the purpose. He is thinking instead of the component parts of mission effort itself, and asking where the need is of all the bureaucratic gingerbread which requires a bureau. Thornwell is like the famed head of Marks and Spencer who took a look one afternoon at what a salesgirl in one of his mammoth chain of stores was actually doing. He found that in connection with each sale she had among other things to fill out a piece of paper, which went into the back rooms, which went -- which went -- there was no end to it. One look was enough; by cutting out that one unnecessary piece of paper he could save his firm the work of handling 25 <u>million</u> pieces of paper a year. He cut it out.

Thornwell reiterates the description of the job.

---

[58] The same, p 159.

First, the preachers.

> Boards can no more make a preacher than they can make the hairs of our heads white or black.[59]

Second, the ministerial education.

> These ministers are to be educated; granted. They are to be sent to the schools and colleges of the country, and if they are unable to pay their expenses, they are to be supported by the bounty of the church.[60]

Third, the finances.

> Is there any thing in this too hard or too mysterious for a Presbytery to perform? The money must be collected from particular congregations, and I do not see why the demands of a Presbytery should be less respected than the authority of a Board? I see no magic in an ecclesiastical corporation that shall infallibly open the purses of the people.[61]

Turning to two particular details mentioned by Smyth -- the task of surveying so extensive a field as the whole world, and the choice of fields for a given missionary -- all can be done as well in Presbytery as by any Board. "I here challenge him," Thornwell added,

> to construct a single syllogism, which will not palpably beg the question, out of any of the materials contained in the passage which has been fully quoted.
>
> I doubt, if fact, whether he can read his pompous enumeration of particulars from which he has pretended to draw his "most certain and evident" conclusion without laughing at his own extravagance.
>
> It is really amusing to see a man start out with

---

[59]The same, p 160.

[60]The same.

[61]The same. Paragraphing supplied.

> boasting promises of what he intends to prove, and then find that all his reasoning is nothing but a statement, in another form, of the very thing to be proved.[62]

So far as the logic of it goes, Thornwell is right. This does not mean that Thornwell's logic will get far with others who like Smyth start with the details as currently handled by the Board operation, and identify that particular set of administrative details with the work of mission.

In conclusion, then, on this section of Smyth's argument, we read

> The reviewer's proposition was that Presbyteries are inadequate to send the gospel to the heathen --- the proof [the reviewer offers] is, that sending the gospel to the heathen includes a great many particulars; and not a solitary reason is given, why these particulars, so elaborately detailed, are beyond the capacity of the Presbyteries to manage or conduct.[63]

One of Thomas Smyth's most emphatic passages in the Review of the Calm Discussion is that one in which he pictures the Board replaced by a Board of Deacons, and asks if any sound businessman would entrust affairs of such importance to such a body. Thornwell is not impressed. He presents the passage, and comments,

> [W]ho ever proposed such a scheme? It is assuredly not to be found in the Calm Discussion. The plan there insisted on is, that the courts of the church, the Presbyteries, are to do the business now done by the Boards, and to employ these deacons, according to God's appointment, as their finaccial agents.[64]

---

[62] The same.

[63] The same, pp 160-161.

[64] The same, p 161.

Does Smyth intend to say that the Presbyteries are not "just as trustworthy, just as faithful, just as able, and just as efficient as the Boards that have been named?...

> He must show us why it is that the "supervision, direction and controul" which he pronounces to be the very life of our benevolent operations, "more important even, than money or the physical resources," cannot just as safely be committed to the Presbyteries of the church, as to ecclesiastical corporations.
>
> I ask triumphantly, why? and echo answers --- why?[65]

Smyth had undertaken to show that Thornwell's plan was unscriptural and unconstitutional. "Are we then to understand him as asserting," asks Thornwell, half of whose plan is to commit the work to the Presbyteries, "that Presbyteries are unscriptural?" The other half of the plan was to commit finances to deacons. Does Smyth also intend to say "that deacons are not recognized in the word of God?"[66]

Smyth had asserted that deacons are confined to local churches. Thornwell replies that it would be as reasonable to fancy that elders are confined to local churches.[67] The Scripture teaches the general through the particular. The diaconate was formed to relieve the apostles from demands on their time for a worthy material project -- feeding poor widows -- at the expense of their time left available for prayer and the ministry of the Word. "That one specific duty is mentioned, in accordance with the general methods of Scripture, as a specimen of a class."

---

[65]The same. Paragraphing supplied.

[66]The same.

[67]The same, p 162.

> As, then, it is frequently the method of scripture to teach by example, where is the impropriety in supposing that the attention to the poor enjoined upon deacons, was intended to include the whole department of secular business with which the church was to be concerned?
>
> It is certain that the reason assigned by the apostles for ordering their election, applies just as strongly to the collection and disbursement of funds for one purpose as for another. Their object was not to get rid of attending to the poor, but to get rid of secular distractions: "It is not reason," said they, "that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word." (Acts vi. 2, 4.)[68]

So also the deacons served the whole college of the apostles not by travelling about with them but by being under their inspection and control while they continued in Jerusalem. This is the relationship Thornwell would have them sustain to the Presbyteries.[69]

For Thornwell it is as clear as daylight. "What would they have gained," he asks, "by divesting themselves of the care of the poor, and continuing to be perplexed with the collection of funds for all other purposes?

> It must be perfectly obvious to every candid mind that the entire secular business of the church, was entrusted to the deacons --- that one specific duty is mentioned, in accordance with the general method of Scripture, as a specimen of a class, and that the reason of the appointment determines the extent of the duties imposed. Here, then, is necessary inference deduced from scripture, clearly confirming the general position of the Calm Discussion.[70]

---

[68]The same, pp 162-163. Paragraphing and italics added.

[69]The same, p 163.

[70]The same, p 163. Paragraphing supplied.

> The office of deacon, then, as set forth in the Calm Discussion, is both scriptural and constitutional, and all the reviewer's preposterous efforts to make me the originator of new officers and a new set of courts, are utterly abortive and ridiculous.
>
> The idea that a deacon cannot attend to the secular business of the Presbytery or Assembly without being removed from his particular congregation, is perfectly ludicrous and absurd. In reading this part of the reviewer's article, it is hard to believe that he is really serious. His whole train of reasoning has so much the appearance of a hoax....[71]

James Henley Thornwell finds it completely baffling that a Presbyterian has so little use for the Presbyterian system.

> Still, although he cannot refute it either from the scriptures or from the constitution of the church, the reviewer obstinately maintains that the scheme defended in the Calm Discussion, is "perfectly chimerical. It bases a system of practical operation upon a mere theoretical hypothesis."
>
> What! are our Presbyteries merely visionary bodies, incapable of being put into practical operation?
>
> Was it a visionary scheme which the apostles adopted when they desired to be emancipated from secular distraction?
>
> Is our whole Form of Government a mere hypothesis which can never be carried into practical effect?
>
> If so, it is time to review our standards and to abandon Presbyterianism as a mere chimera, which, however attractive in theory, can never produce any valuable results.[72]

Again, in appealing to the practical common sense of his audience, Smyth had said that the Calm Discussion assumed

---

[71]The same, p 163.

[72]The same. Paragraphing supplied.

"a self-controlling, self-perpetuating principle to exist some-where or some-how within these operations." To Thornwell this is nonsense. How can this be more so in the case of missions than in any other business Presbytery has before it?

> Nor do I see how, [Thornwell explains,] if the Presbyteries are liable to such a charge, the Boards are free from it. The whole sentence is nonsense. "It attributes," [Smyth] proceeds, "to our several judicatories a foresight and wisdom which can provide for the thousand contingencies which may arise during the course of every year, and that they could make all those provisional arrangements in the course of a brief session, which now occupy busily during the entire year, our several officers and committees."[73]

"I would simply ask," Thornwell responds, "how long the Boards meet -- how long they continue in session, and why the Presbyteries may not possess as large a share of foresight and wisdom as these contrivances possess?"[74]

We remember that Thornwell has asked Breckinridge to supply some of the concrete data he himself does not have available. Breckinridge as a prominent pastor, independently wealthy, located close to Philadelphia and New York, with convenient transportation from Baltimore, has been actively involved in the Boards as a member. In a footnote at this point Breckinridge now gives us one of the few

---

[73]The same, p 163. "The objection lies just as powerfully against the one as it does against the other." Thornwell adds, "If the Boards have committees to carry out the details of their plans during the interim of their sessions, what is to prevent the Presbyteries from adopting the same arrangement, and what is to hinder the Presbyteries from meeting just as often as emergencies may require?" (p 163)

[74]The same, pp 163-164.

factual summaries incorporated into the debates, facts which he has at first hand and which in some cases would be difficult for us to reconstruct at this distance.

> This is an extremely important question, [Breckinridge comments,] and whatever may be thought of the argument, the churches should know the manner in which these Boards manage the business committed to them.
>
> The four Boards of the church consisted, in 1840, of the following number of members, viz.: Board of Domestic Missions, 64 members; (p. 61, of its Report;) the Board of Foreign Missions, 120 members; (p. 31 and 32 of its Report;) the Board of Publication, 104 members; (p. 18, 19 of its Report;) the Board of Education, 68 members; (P. 17 of its Report.)
>
> The writer of this note was never a member of the Board of Domestic Missions (as he remembers) --- and therefore knows little about its internal economy or proceedings. He has been a member of all the remaining three, and has occasionally attended the meetings of each of them.
>
> The Board of Publication meets monthly, but if our personal notice is a just rule of judgment, we should say that exclusive of its Executive Committee, so many as one in ten of its members, rarely attend its regular meetings.
>
> We have attended every meeting of the Board of Foreign Missions, we believe, from its organization; its meetings were at first semi-annual; they are now annual only. The Minutes of 1840, (the latest in our reach,) show that the Board held its annual meeting in Philadelphia, that its sessions continued three days, and that 40 (out of its 120) members were present, during some part of those sessions.
>
> Our recollection is, that in 1841, the case was still worse; indeed that not more than a dozen persons regularly attended the short annual sessions of this important body.
>
> Now can any thing be more ridiculous, than to say that a few persons, met for a few days once a year, can fulfil the duties or discharge the obligations of the church in regard to this vast subject? Or can any thing

> be more insulting to the church courts, than to allege their incompetency, to do this work this well?
>
> It would be a most edifying commentary on the urgent pleas for the incapacity of our church courts and the ardent commendations of the labours of our ecclesiastical corporations, if some one would publish a table of their times of meeting, and the attendance on their meetings, for a series of years. We unhesitatingly assert our conviction to be, that the result would be a new proof of what we long ago asserted to be the fact, viz., that the whole power of those Boards is ultimately vested in a few persons, who are virtually self-appointed.
>
> --- Ed. [Ro. J. Breckinridge][75]

In the course of his having taken up Smyth's arguments one by one, Thornwell's principal points in rebuttal have been made. But what continues to disappoint him in the Defence of the Ecclesiastical Boards of the Presbyterian Church put up by Smyth is Smyth's assumption that the Presbyteries are incompetent and untrustworthy. "[Thornwell's plan] assumes," Smyth had added,

> "that the funds will be voluntarily forthcoming from all churches in every portion of the church."
>
> And do the Boards assume that these funds shall be forcibly forthcoming? The Lord loveth a cheerful giver, and we have no reason to expect that any but free-will offerings will be accepted of God. I do not see how Boards can raise money at pleasure, whether the people choose to give it or no.
>
> If there is not a spirit of love to dying souls and of zeal for the Lord's kingdom diffused among our churches, no organization on earth can make them do the work of the Lord. If the heart be not right, the acts will never be good --- if the tree be not sound, the fruit can never be wholesome.

---

[75] The same, pp 163-164. Paragraphing added. The Presbyterian Boards so described are seen to be different in several respects from the organizations called Presbyterian Boards today.

> The reviewer evidently thinks that there is some magic in a Board which shall charm avarice into liberality --- inspire a love of God where the Saviour's love has never been shed abroad --- kindle a flame of zeal in the hearts of the formal and hypocritical, and discharge all the offices which the scriptures attribute to the Holy Ghost.[76]

In modern times, we reflect, Smyth the Reviewer has had much company in his position; but the magic of the automatic collection of revenue by means of systematic benevolence has not extended automatically to the Boards themselves, certainly not a magic capable of charming avarice into liberality. The words of James Henley Thornwell remain: "If there is not a spirit of love to dying souls and of zeal for the Lord's kingdom diffused among our churches, no organization on earth can make them do the work of the Lord."

At our remove from the Nineteenth Century, and conditioned as we are to think of her American theologians as academic figures grinding out academic treatises, we too easily forget the evangelical warmth, the vigorous concern for a vibrant church, which permeated so many of her most famous theologians. Thornwell expects to find no shortage of able and willing deacons to handle the financial end of missions simply because they love God, men who will be as willing to serve the Lord in attending to such things as those were who were ordained to "a much more troublesome business in Jerusalem."[77] In summing up his Reply to Thomas Smyth's Review of his Calm Discussion on the Lawfulness, Scripturalness and Expediency of Ecclesiastical Boards, James Henley Thornwell of South Carolina College and the Presbytery of Charleston reaches out for our wills and understand-

---

[76]The same, pp 164-165.

[77]The same, p 165.

ing in this way:

> The reviewer seems to think that there is no such thing as vital Godliness in any of our congregations --- that the Boards are a standing substitute for the graces of the Spirit, and that, consequently, if they should be removed, the wants of a dying world would never excite the first tear of sympathy, the first sign of compassion, the first prayer for relief, or the first effort of its salvation.
>
> If this, indeed, be the condition of our multiplied churches --- Ichabod, may be written upon our walls. The glory has departed, and no inventions of man can ever save us from the withering curse of an insulted God. If this, indeed, be so, the heathen world may say to our people, as the Saviour said to the daughters of Jerusalem, "weep not for me, but weep for yourselves."
>
> Our first work is evidently at home, in our own hearts, and we should give no sleep to our eyes, nor slumber to our eyelids, till the insulted Spirit of God has returned to our desolate Zion and built up the walls of our ruined city. If we are dead ourselves, we cannot expect to give life to others --- our most laborious efforts will be only the dead burying their dead.
>
> If, on the other hand, we are alive to God, and he has enlarged our hearts, we will run in the way of all his commandments --- our meat and our drink will be to do the will of our heavenly Father, and men, in abundance, will be found to fill all the offices which Christ has appointed in his church.
>
> His people shall be willing in the day of his power.
>
> I beg the reader now to review calmly and dispassionately the assumptions which the reviewer declares to be "most utopian and gratuitous," charged upon the Calm Discussion, in the passage which has been considered, sentence by sentence, and seriously ask himself whether they amount to any thing more than this[:] that Christian men love the Lord Jesus Christ, and his cause, and are willing, in their serveral stations and departments of labour, to spend and be

spent in his service?

Is not this the whole of that violent hypothesis, on account of which the scheme which I defend is pronounced to be preposterous in the extreme?

And has it come to this, that all faith, all love, all zeal, have departed from our borders, and that a man who shall venture to assume that such things as grace and piety are to be found in the length and breadth of the whole Presbyterian church in these United States of America, must be held up as utterly wild, utopian, and visionary --- bereft of his senses and in love with chimeras? Merciful God! to what a pass are we come!

And dost thou, my brother, read me a lecture for speaking disrespectfully of the Boards?

Shall the man who does not tremble, notwithstanding solemn vows, to denounce the institutions of God, and to uncover the nakedness of the mother that has nursed him, who does not hesitate to revile the Lord's people as a nation of hypocrites and a race of evil doers --- who is shocked at the assumption that any man can be found so utterly utopian as to love the Lord Jesus Christ and his cause, and to count it a privilege to labour in his Master's vineyard --- be yet astonished and amazed when the suspicion is expressed that Boards are not the best guarantees[78] of faith once delivered to the saints!

James Henley Thornwell loved his church. In public print he was willing, as we see, to stake his faith and name that grace and piety were yet to be found in the length and breadth of her, faith and piety enough for Presbyteries of ordinary pastors, elders, deacons and people -- the Presbyterian Church in her organized ecclesiastical capacity --to hear the word of God and to obey its command for them to set seriously to work at the task of bringing the good news of their Savior to the world with her perishing millions.

---

[78]The same, pp 165-166.

In Synod and in the press he had done his best to stir up that grace, faith and piety, calling his people back to a more excellent way.

Was anybody listening?

There was. The man who had stood with him in the 1840 meeting of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, the friend whose letter he had wept to receive when alone on a foreign strand, was listening.

John Calkins Coit had not forgotten a line of what happened at Synod.

JOHN CALKINS COIT UNDERTAKES A REVOLUTION

Remote and detached as conversations on the floor of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia in 1840 may seem to us in a more hectic time, they had an immediate and profound effect on some of the members present.[1]

One of these was the Reverend John Calkins Coit (1799-1863), energetic and enthusiastic native of New London,

---

[1]This section is based on hitherto unpublished manuscript material located at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina, and on the verbatim coverage in the full runs of the Charleston Observer at the Historical Foundation, in which the editor prints the complete and extensive text of the correspondence between the Committee of Harmony Presbytery and their missionary member on the Gaboon River in West Africa, John Leighton Wilson.

Because it sets forth for the first time an account of the development of a practical attempt at the grass roots to implement in Presbytery Thornwell's theoretical and practical principles for the conduct of domestic and foreign missions by Presbyteries, which had been turned down by the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia but published in the Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, throwing new light on an area of the debate hitherto thought blank, Coit's views are presented in detail. (See above, pp 93-129). The material presented in this section by means of direct quotations, though full when compared with the amount of verbatim quotation supplied in this study from other participants in the debate, is only a small fraction of the available Coit material.

Connecticut, who came to Cheraw, South Carolina, at the age of 24 to practice law. In the Presbyterian Church there he became first a Christian, then an elder, and in time its pastor.[2]

Coit's position on the question of the proper administration of Presbyterian missions was, as we shall see, considerably in advance of Thornwell's -- so much so, that had Coit been a prominent personality, writing for national rather than local circulation, Thornwell might have become known to us as a mediating figure between the extremes of Hodge and Coit.

"Do let me hear from you soon," Coit wrote to Thornwell, some time after Thornwell's first article on Boards had appeared in Breckinridge's Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine, and before his second article, answering Smyth, had been printed in the Spirit of the XIX. Century.[3] Coit continued,

> I hope the notion of a commission was only a passing delusion, that found no lodgment in your heart or mind & that you are content to defend the Standards as they are & rescue them from under the feet of those who instead of trampling them under foot should hold them up that all who rally to the rescue may understand for what we are contending.
>
> As long as new schemes are proposed depend upon it: that all who in principle love our order & have understand-

---

[2] Abstract of Minutes, Harmony Presbytery, Session CIV, April 1st, 1863, p 38.

[3] See above, pp 206-243.

The surviving two pages of this letter carry no date. Its postscript says, "...I wish to write Breckinridge in time for some extra copies of your article. I wrote to this effect before your first article appeared, but I wrote too late."

> ingly come into the Church, will turn away the ear; but while we contend for the order <u>according to our Book</u> we have the advantage & <u>must</u> finally triumph unless a majority in the Old School Church have abandoned the book, & even then we shall triumph & they will go out <u>because they were not of us</u>.
>
> Grace Mercy truth & peace be with you & all yours
> from God our Father
> & J. Xt Our Lord
> yr frnd & Bro J. C. Coit.[4]

Writing to Thornwell on another occasion, in January of 1842, Coit elaborated. He set down some thoughts "in the nature of reasons why Presbyteries should be the bodies to conduct missions." First on his lists came the principle of the Presbytery as the court of leading responsibility in the Presbyterian system:

> 1. Because to them <u>alone</u> belongs the province of ordaining, judging, watching & overseeing their own members & to them alone are they responsible primarily in the[ir] ecclesiastical relations & works.

Next, the pastors and people would be better informed and more active at this level than if the work were being done by others at a distance in a central Board:

---

[4]J[ohn] C[alkins] Coit to James Henley Thornwell, no date, in the Thornwell Collection, The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

The Presbyterian Church in the United States at this time had not yet come to the practice of providing in its form of government for certain actions to be committed by Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly to Commissions, defined as committees with powers to act and conclude business, in contrast with the normal committees which have power only to consider and recommend business.

2. Because the ministers & people in a Presbytery would know what they were doing & by being personally active in the work, would do more & to better purpose, the appropriate duty of the church] which is "to hold forth the word of life"

Third, Coit felt that there was a sound practical reason to prefer local mission management as opposed to denominational management. Jealousies and disagreements afflicting the denomination prevent hearty cooperation in denominational projects. Bring the work down to the Presbytery level and each Presbytery's effort will command the confidence of its people:

3. Because there are many topics of jealousy, and diversity of opinions in different sections of the church which must impair for different reasons confidence in any central agency for the whole Ch[urch] & to that extent in different places prevent the people & churches from coming up to the work [witness the miserable jealousies of the Abolitionists & others for their idols] whereas if each Presbytery did its own work these causes of contention & schism would not affect the general result.

Coit had the advantage of being neither a professor nor a bureaucrat. As a working pastor and member of Presbytery, he was all too aware that in neither capacity was he getting any significant personal contact with the home and foreign missionaries whom his gifts and the gifts of his people were supporting. His fourth thought grew out of what he knew was a similar situation for nearly all the Presbyterian church:

4. Because if the Missionaries foreign & domestic were by their direct responsibility & correspondence brought into contact with the Presbyteries & people to whom they belong, a more direct, efficient & intelligent sympathy would exist & the aims & prayers of the Church be offered up with more knowledge & faith.

Finally -- though "finally" is always a relative word when applied to John Calkins Coit, past master of the postscript -- the most important thing in missionary responsibility was the fact that it is laid directly on each Christian. To pass it along to some remote Board was to try to evade responsibility. To send money was even worse:

> 5. Because the Churches & the people would in this way themselves perform their <u>own</u> <u>duties</u> instead of compounding them for money paid to some central agency to employ somebody to do it <u>for</u> <u>them</u>. Every central government in this behalf invol[v]es & must involve
>
> 1. A dispensation from the duty personally.
> 2. A composition for money.
> 3. A substitution of others in lieu of personal service.
> 4. A plenary indulgence.[5]

For Coit, there were usually some more things to add, and further on in this communication we find two of them. He did not appreciate what appeared to him to be an arrogance on the part of denominational Board administrators, and he was appalled at the narrow vision he found all round him.

> The ignorance of the nature of the Xtian vocation among our people & ministers is amazing: & it seems to me their eyes never will be open to see the scope of the

---

[5]All the above inset quotations come seriatim from the letter of J[ohn] C[alkins] Coit to James Henley Thornwell, January, 18, 1842, in the Thornwell Collection, The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

"Dispensation" and "indulgence" were fighting words in the Presbyterian church of 1842. Her pastors and members were still warmly aware of the place of indulgences in Roman Catholic practice, and of the sale of indulgences for money as the event which led Luther to his 95 Theses and the formal beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Direct personal responsibility for both faith and practice was a cornerstone in Reformed and Presbyterian life.

> Heavenly Calling: till they are employed actually & personally in "good works[.]" The Presbyteries are degenerating into finance committees or overseers of schoolmasters; or rather beggars for schoolmasters: & these fellows seem to think the church is & of right ought to be under them as its "governors & rulers" Has not the Ch[urch] attained maturity? Is it not time to put away "Childish things"? Are there none among us with ears to hear the voice of the Son of God? Must we be kept forever under the "beggarly elements?" It seems to me Presbyteries ought to have "boldness" enough to presume to be competent to do their own business,[6] & that they should discriminate between Spirit & Matter.

"N. B.," he added, in vertical lines squeezed into the space between his two facing pages, "[t]he General Ass[emb]ly being not an original Ju[dicatory,] but a court of appeal & General [illegible]: can have no jurisdiction [within] the limits of its own [c]hurches. The Churches which it represents are its constituency. The principle that the Genl Assembly itself has original jurisdiction over missions or education is fundamentally wrong. The Presbyteries by the Constitution have granted a limited power in the Chapter on Missions & the Genl Assembly have no pretext of right to any other."[7]

Thornwell, reading his mail day by day, settled down into his work at the College of South Carolina. What answer he made to Coit is so far undiscovered. He was confident, we know, that God in his own way and time would bless the seed sown in Synod and through the pages of the Baltimore press.

We do not have a record of how Coit went about patting down the seed and watering it in Harmony Presbytery, but we know something about Coit and we know something about the

---

[6]The same, page 2.

[7]The same, center between pages 1 and 2.

Presbytery. Her minute book, bound in soft suede leather burnt-engraved with the title writ clear for all to see through the centuries, is written on strong acid-free stock which bears up well to this day under the browning inks her clerks employed to write down the required accounts of all her actions.

In just over a year's time -- fast work then, and fast work now, to get a new idea onto, into and through a Presbytery -- Coit was back to Thornwell in another letter with large news.

Cheraw 5. April 1843

My Dear Bro

I have just returned from Presbytery. We had a very full meeting both of ministers & elders & among other things passed the following resolution unanimously.

Resolved

"That J. C. Coit. Thos R. English. Wm M Reid Ministers & L. Prince. W. E. Jones & Wm Wilson Elders be a committee to open a correspondence with the Revd John Leighton Wilson a foreign missionary and a member of this Presbytery, the scope & end of which correspondence is intended to restore his ministerial & ecclesiastical responsibilities to this Presbytery and to dissolve them with all other bodies: and that for the future he may rely for his temporal support upon this Presbytery & the churches & people under its care."

Presbytery also adopted by resolution the deacon principle & elected from among the ordained deacons in the churches J. F. Mathieson as the deacon & treasurer of this Presbytery to whom all money matters &c should be referred &c this also was finally done "new care."

Thus you see Harmony is disposed to be free & true in

ecclesiastical administration.[8]

This appears to be the first case on record of an American presbytery setting up a central benevolence treasurership. Before this, and in all the presbyteries besides Harmony throughout the General Assembly, benevolence money for projects outside the congregation and outside the Presbytery was collected by agents for the projects, either in person or forwarded to them. There was no Presbytery officer charged with responsibility for collecting and managing and forwarding benevolent funds to the charitable enterprises of the churches and the people.

In the second place, this is the first case in which a Presbytery took Thornwell's suggestion seriously, and called on the regular Presbyterian officer who in the Presbyterian book of government is charged with responsibility for the administration among other things of charitable monies in the local congregation, appointing him to take a cognate responsibility at the Presbytery level. On the one hand the Presbytery took a local church officer and projected his gifts and responsibilities onto a wider scene. On the other hand in one motion the Presbytery wiped out, at least on paper, a whole class of officers -- the financial agents -- who were unknown to the official Presbyterian form of government. In their place she set an ancient officer who is named in Scripture and honored in the book of government.

---

[8]J[ohn] C[alkins] Coit to James Henley Thornwell, April 1843, in the Thornwell Collection, The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[9]MSS Minutes of Harmony Presbytery, Synod of South Carolina, April 1830 - October, 1848, p 331. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

In addition to this, it was a simplification, one treasurer replacing many agents, and it was a return to Presbyterian government: where the Agents had been anybody, and responsible only to the organizations they represented, the new treasurer was an officer of the Presbytery, directly responsible to Presbytery herself.

Needless to say, the enactment of legislation by the Presbytery was only a first step. All the variegated agents were still loose on the world. It would take time to implement in actual practice what Presbytery was setting up. But it was a revolution.

The missionary question came in two parts: domestic and foreign. Harmony Presbytery was, with all the other presbyteries, the ultimate source of the Presbyterian ministers who had offered themselves for service with the great American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the American Home Mission Society, the Board of [Domestic] Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. To her or to one of her sister Presbyteries each missionary had applied originally to be given oversight as a candidate for the Gospel Ministry. To her or to one of her sister presbyteries each missionary had applied first for licensure to preach, and finally for full ordination as a Minister of the Gospel, authorized to teach and preach the Word of God and authorized to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

But if their calling was not to a settled pastorate, it was then necessary for them to apply for appointment by the Board which had work of the kind and in the geographic area which the Holy Spirit had led them to believe was God's choice for them. Appointment for service abroad meant that

their appointment, support, and direction came from one of the Foreign Mission Boards, for Presbyterians either the venerable ABCFM in Boston or the still remote BFMPCUSA in Philadelphia -- later removed to New York.

Harmony Presbytery had one of these overseas men on her rolls. He was John Leighton Wilson, discoverer of the gorilla. Just John L. Wilson in his younger days, by now he was signing himself steadily as J. Leighton Wilson. Son of one of the oldest and most honored families in the Presbytery and ordained for overseas service in 1833, he was an able, devoted and thoroughly respected missionary under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Together with his beautiful and equally devoted wife, Jane Bayard, she who was orphan cousin of Charles Hodge and debutante belle brought up in the finest that the wealth and society of Philadelphia and Savannah could offer, Wilson was stationed on the Gaboon River in the steaming tropics of West Africa, months away by mail and light years away in the conditions he was coping with. This was the J. Leighton Wilson who kept Palmerston supplied with the facts and encouragement he needed to stand firm and insist that the British Navy keep up its blockade against the slave trade when some in ignorance and others in avarice claimed that it was a waste of time and money to continue the blockade.[10]

---

[10] J. Leighton Wilson and Walter Lowrie are beyond question the two major mission statesmen and administrators in the history of the Presbyterian churches of North America. Both served with distinction for decades in the formative years of Presbyterian mission policy and work; both are overdue for major scholarly research. Either would make a gripping and instructive book.

The major sources for a study of Wilson are the Memoirs of Rev John Leighton Wilson D.D., Missionary to Africa, and Secretary of Foreign Missions, by Hampden C. DuBose; his numerous published articles; the

To the challenge of reclaiming to Harmony Presbytery her missionary responsibility for Wilson and his work, abdicated without thought to the ABCFM at his appointment years ago, J. C. Coit now turned his attention.

He felt fortunate in the resources of the Presbytery and in the atmosphere surrounding their start. "The committee are to meet at Darlington C. H. on 1st May prox°," he wrote, "when it is expected that we shall prepare our letter to Wilson. As chairman of the committee I ask your views. Mr. Wilson the elder on the committee is the father of Jn° Leighton Wilson, & he & so far as I have heard the community about Kingstree Church with the ministers & elders present at Presbytery hailed with joy the movement."[11]

> But the object of this letter is to invoke your wisdom in the shape of suggestion & counsel in regard to the above correspondence....
>
> There appears to be no doubt about the <u>means</u> available in our bounds to sustain him &c. But here is the point.
>
> What constitutes the <u>work</u>, the great work of a Xtian Missionary in a Pagan & barbarous land? Is it gathering together children into schools? Forming a written language? Establishing printing presses?

---

archives of the A.B.C.F.M.; and the John Leighton Wilson Collection at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina. A scattered body of Wilson's correspondence is known to lie in various institutions and repositories. A fascinating and useful Master's Thesis could be devoted to locating, collecting, analysing and presenting the complete Wilson correspondence so far as it can be located.

[11] J[ohn] C[alkins] Coit to James Henley Thornwell, April 1843, in the Thornwell Collection, The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

Teaching the useful & tasteful arts? Literature sciences & politics of civilisation?

Or is it learning to speak the languages & then going about preaching the gospel to the poor & ignorant building up & organising churches & laying these people & churches as the foundation of future conquests. Thus making the church the organ of light & regeneration.

The first is the Pope's system & is adopted so far as I know by all Protestant churches. The latter is keeping God's commandments & is the only plan that as an individual (with my present views of duty) I could aid with prayers & alms.

Let me hear from you. Let me hear fully. I need not mark out the ground for you.

I wish Wilson & every other minister of this Presbytery to give himself wholly to "the ministry of the Word of God & to prayer," to be at liberty to worship God according to the principles we all profess to receive as Gods wisdom; & to be accountable to no earthly tribunal for our work [--] who, when, where, why, or how [--] but to Harmony Presbytery only. That we may "mind the same thing" & being delivered out of the hand of our enemies we might serve God without fear in holiness & righteousness before Him all the days of our life.

Let me hear soon

Your friend & Brother,

J. C. Coit

15 ministers
12 elders
27 In Presbytery present at Kingstree[12]

We should stop short at this point and take our bearings, analyzing the position before plunging into the luxuriant forest of Coit's further thought.

---

[12]J[ohn] C[alkins] Coit to James Henley Thornwell, April 1843, in the Thornwell Collection, The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

Here is what Thornwell had been looking for -- and here is what many a missionary out on the field has longed for. If Presbytery is where those most intimately responsible for the government of the Presbyterian Church meet; if to the presbyters -- to the ministers and elders -- the Presbyterian church entrusts the process of discovering the will of God and applying it; and if the missionary work of the Church is the church's business and an important part of the church's business; then Presbytery should be finding out what the basic questions are in missionary work. The Presbytery should be wrestling with mission questions with the same mind-power and heart-power she is called on to apply to all the other questions which come before her.[13]

Forget for a moment Coit's division of missionary methods as he suggests them to Thornwell and asks for comment. He is mainly right, of course, that the first list had been the Pope's list for centuries, and he is right in saying that all the Protestant churches of the world, in going into missionary work abroad, had copied it. But we should blot out of our minds for a moment the content of the list; most of us would raise questions about one or more items on them, and this distracts us from the heart of the matter. The great new event here is that down in Harmony Presbytery, surely among the least of the daughters of Zion, people were asking the bedrock questions about missionary method. Ministers and elders in a Presbyterian presbytery, perhaps for the first time in history, probably for the first time in the history

---

[13] On any basis this was a significant milestone in the history of the development of American Presbyterianism. As will appear, the immediate results in the Foreign Missions area of Coit's program for Presbytery responsibility were on a different scale from the results of his program as applied to domestic missions. See below, pp 318-332.

of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and certainly for the first time in the history of Harmony Presbytery, were asking each other as Presbyters and as a Presbytery the key question:

> What constitutes the work, the great work, of a Christian missionary in a Pagan and barbarous land?

We do not know what Thornwell replied. We do know that a principal plank in Thornwell's platform was that in the Presbyterian Church if you wanted to know the answers with assurance, you took your question up in regularly constituted Presbyteries composed of ministers and elders. That was where, this side of heaven, Christ's mind and God's wisdom were to be found. Not that Thornwell had not lost enough votes in the courts of the church to know that finding the mind of Christ and God's wisdom through assembled presbyters was no quick process, and not one calculated to please either the impatient or those like himself who felt that the Holy Spirit had already made some of the answers perfectly clear. But there, where the ministers and elders met together in the regularly constituted courts, was where in Thornwell's view a Presbyterian was bound to look and keep on looking for the will of God for the work of his church. And now here in Harmony, three years after his first raising the issue on the floor of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, the seed was taking root.

What happened next in Harmony Presbytery?

The first thing that happened will bring a wry smile of sympathy to all who have been working members of these predictable bodies. The Committee met, the Committee remet, the Committee brought in a proposed letter for Presbytery to approve being sent to the unsuspecting missionary wrestling

with his own ample supply of problems, the Presbytery went into a Committee of the Whole to discuss the draft letter, the Presbytery sent the draft back to the Committee, the Presbytery listened to further report from the Committee, the Presbytery enlarged the Committee, the Committee continued its labors, the Committee reported again, and finally, one year later, Presbytery approved a letter that was to go to John Leighton Wilson from the Committee on behalf of the Presbytery of Harmony.

John Calkins Coit, however, was not a man who was so wed to the pure process of Presbytery procedure as he might have been had this kind of responsibility in mission been laid on Presbytery as a matter of long standing. Without waiting for the upper and nether millstones of Presbytery to grind exceeding fine all the sharper edges off his Committee's letter, he began publishing it in installments on the waiting pages of The Charleston Observer, Benjamin Gildersleeve the Proprietor and Editor.[14]

---

[14]Benjamin Gildersleeve (1791-1875) was another in the line of tough New Englanders who came south and put iron into the soul of Dixie. Born near Norwalk, Connecticut, son of Lieutenant Finch Gildersleeve of the Revolutionary army, he was converted at the age of 21 by a revived Yale student, graduated from Middlebury in 1814, and went to Georgia to teach school.

Convinced that Georgia needed the gospel even more than she needed learning, Gildersleeve graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1820, was in editorial work before he was out of seminary, and in 1826 moved to Charleston to be proprietor and editor of the Charleston Observer from 1827 to 1845. From 1845 to 1856 he was in Richmond as owner and editor of the Watchman and Observer, and from then to the end of 1860 was editor there of the Central Presbyterian together with Hoge and Moore.

That is only the bare beginning of a sketch of Gildersleeve's ministry. With Thomas Smyth he defied

The letter ran in the paper for ten weeks of installments, a full newspaper-sized page or more at a time. Surely this letter takes the all-time prize for the longest letter

---

the Charleston Union Presbytery on the evening of December 4, 1838, taking all the books of Presbytery and going downstairs to organize the Presbytery of Charleston, loyal to the Old School General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. "I have been amused at thinking how blank the others must have looked and felt," Mrs. Smyth wrote to her husband 21 years later, "when Mr. G. picked up the books &c. and you all went and left them to themselves. It must have been a rich scene." [September 11, 1859, as printed in Louisa Cheves Stoney, Editor, Autobiographical Notes, Letters and Reflections, by Thomas Smyth, D. D.]

Gildersleeve was constantly preaching, and ministering to open doors others passed by, such as the Virginia Penitentiary.

The War left him freed, so to speak, from the editorial chair. In the remote hills of southwestern Virginia he began a second lifetime of service, this time as an evangelist, completely changing the habits of a long life. He kept this up, never late for an appointment, until at the age of eighty and half blind he would still ride horseback eight miles in driving snow and bitter cold to fulfill an appointment to preach the Word of God.

Past eighty and at last retired at the home of a son in Tazewell County, "bent and tottering and completely blind, he would not consent to fold his hands in idleness, but employed his time in giving instructions to several youths, for which they made some grateful return by reading to him such current literature as he chose to hear." [Minutes, Synod of Virginia, October, 1875, p 347.]

The principal materials for a study of Gildersleeve's life and ministry are the full runs of the weekly papers he edited for thirty-three years, with the Minutes of the Presbyteries and Synods in which he served, at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina. The work of locating and collating his correspondence is waiting for an interested scholar or biographer.

on the subject of Missionary Administration ever printed in the public press.[15] Gildersleeve, Sole Proprietor and Editor, printed the first installment, a full page and a half, in type slightly smaller than is used today on the New York Times. He added the following editorial comment of his own:

CHARLESTON.

Saturday Morning, July 1, 1843.

HARMONY PRESBYTERY AND THE AMERICAN BOARD.

☞Remittances for arrears to the Observer have been, of late, "like angel's visits, few and far between." We mention this as one of "the signs of the times," in which we are personally interested, to a very considerable extent -- and as one of the evils of Editorial life which it is in the power of thoughtful and considerate subscribers greatly to relieve. And as most of our subscribers are of that class, we may reasonably expect that, with the least possible delay, every exertion will be made on their and our behalf.

As many of our Presbyteries have members in connexion with the American Board, as Foreign Missionaries, the subject of their relations has very naturally

---

[15]Those who have actually served on mission fields, or who have had occasion to observe the output of Presbyterian Boards in general, may be inclined to the theory that Coit was a fonctionnaire manque, a pastor whose natural literary habitat was the modern ecclesiastical agency, but who by some inscrutable act of Providence was placed on this earth before the Boards and Agencies of the church had expanded to their present ample capacity to house and print, or at least Xerox, any number of prolix writers.

The method for presenting the clear but voluminous material of the Committee is as follows: First, the Committee's argument is condensed, with clarifying comment. Second, the material, now before the reader as much as possible in its own words, is analyzed and related to other threads in the fabric of the debate.

awakened attention. And the more especially so, as the discussions have been directed to the true principles of Ecclesiastical action in conducting Foreign Missions. But not only the American Board which is a close corporation, and exercises entire and supreme control over its Missionaries; but even the Boards of our own church, whose proceedings are all subject to revision by our highest Judicatory as their Agents, are regarded by many as a wide departure from the true Ecclesiastical principle; and it is contended that the remedy should be applied at once for the correction of the evil, and not suffered to increase till it shall prove incurable.

Hitherto there has been but little formal action upon the subject, except correspondence by Presbyteries with their Missionaries. In some cases, there may have been a proposition to change their relations, but we have no recollection of any to which prominence has hitherto been given; and on this point we regard Harmony Presbytery as deserving the precedence. They have appointed a Committee to institute a correspondence with the Rev. John Leighton Wilson, one of their members, who is a Missionary of the American Board in Africa; and that Committee including the Father of Mr. Wilson, have, we understand, unanimously concurred in the letter addressed to him. It will constitute a long article, as our readers may infer from the first part of it which appears in our columns of this week.

Our own views in relation to the American Board, and the Board of our own church, have been as occasion required, freely given, and it is not necessary here to repeat them. At least we are inclined to hear in full the letter of the Committee, before we express an opinion of its practical bearing upon the cause of Foreign Missions -- merely premising that we publish it as an official document -- leaving its principles as a subject for after consideration.

Obviously the Committee, and especially its Chairman, had much on their minds. What was it? Was it worth looking at? Was it all sound and fury, or did it lay hold of the question and set forth clear answers?

Since nowhere else have we had written down for us from the standpoint of the working Presbytery a detailed applica-

tion of Thornwell's more general position against all Boards, denominational or otherwise, it requires our detailed attention to it as an unusual, wide-ranging, and (in the Twentieth Century) unknown part of the 1839-1861 debate on the administration of Presbyterian missions.

After greeting Wilson as Reverend and Dear Brother, the letter opens with a quotation in full of the three Resolutions of the 1843 Spring meeting of Presbytery, which Coit had quoted with such solid satisfaction to Thornwell immediately on its adjournment. "In discharge of the duty thus imposed upon the committee, they now address you; and it is proper that they should state, somewhat at large, those reflections, reasons and convictions, that have given rise to this correspondence," the letter continues.

> It would require volumes to discuss thoroughly the questions at issue, between the voluntary Societies on the one hand, and the Church of God on the other, as to the mode of administering ecclesiastical affairs, touching missions, and other religious enterprises. We shall, therefore, be compelled to limit ourselves to the more prominent principles involved in this controversy, and in the application of them, principally, to the work of foreign Missions.[16]

The Committee states in some two columns its conviction that "all voluntary Societies for religious purposes in our country...have ever been disturbing forces to the harmonious movements of the Church judicatories;" and that "...this state of things could only be avoided by an actual and entire abdication, on the part of the church government, of all control...." Not impugning the motives of those who began or

---

[16]Until further notice, this and all subsequent quotations from the printed form of the letter to John Leighton Wilson are from The Charleston Observer XVII 26, July 1, 1843, [Installment I], pages 1 and 2; additional paragraphing supplied on occasion.

continue or cooperate in such voluntary Societies, we take up this "warfare" not as "private men," but as men now freed from "a false spirit of activity, enterprise and conquest," speaking out "not in our own words, but...the words of God ....We try the spirits by the word of God...., and we commend to you that word and that way."

"We shall postpone for the present the consideration of the general subject," this introduction concludes, "and proceed to exhibit the facts and proofs of the truth of the following propositions."

> I. That the principles of the Voluntary Society, the A.B.C.F.M., with which you are now, and long have been connected, subvert the foundation of Church Polity in government and discipline; and destroy the religious rights and liberties of Presbyterians.

Your own case is a proof and instance of the truth of this statement. Let us consider it a moment.

Here in its first and opening proposition the judgment of the Committee has gone straight to the point, and to the facts as the Committee sees them. What follows by way of first illustration and specification was Wilson's experience, and has been the experience of every Presbyterian missionary who ever took foreign missionary appointment and bid his Presbytery good-bye:

> From the period of your connection with that Board to the present time, your ecclesiastical relations to this Presbytery have been virtually dissolved[.]
>
> In your cares, fears, hopes, trials, duties, and joys; in the considerations of your position, the people whom you serve, your removal and work in the Ministry; these, and in fact in all your responsibilities, privileges, blessings, and tribulations, connected with the duties pertaining to the office of a preacher of the Gospel in a pagan land, you have been "cut off" from the ecclesiastical fellowship, counsels and instruc-

tions of your Presbytery.

> In all the things connected with the exercise of your spiritual functions, you have conferred with, received instructions from, and submitted to, the Faculty of Government in the A.B.C.F.M. only.

This was true then, we should note, and because the foreign Mission section of Coit's reform program has yet [1977] to be implemented in any American presbytery, it remains true of all American Presbyterian missionaries to this day. Unless they become involved in spectacular heresy or scandal, in all things connected with their spiritual function they are cut off from the ecclesiastical fellowship, counsels, and instructions of their presbyteries, and submit to the instructions of their appointing Board only.

This was getting to the nub of the Committee's first proposition.

In the Presbyterian system of church government, the Presbytery is the Bishop; in administrative respects, the ordained minister is fundamentally responsible to Presbytery. In the ordinary day-to-day routine he may be one of a college of presbyters sitting as the Session in charge of the government of the local congregation, but when push comes to shove, the Presbytery can remove him from his pastorate, can refuse to install him in his pastorate in the first place, and can refuse to allow him to go to another work to which he has been duly called and to which he himself feels led by the Holy Spirit.[17]

---

[17]This power of Presbytery, while seldom exercised positively, exerts enormous influence by its mere indisputable latent presence, ready to be used if necessary. There was perhaps no single ordained Presbyterian minister in

We are not now writing an indictment with the view of convicting you of an offence; we are stating a historical fact, concerning a state of things which has existed for years, and with the implicit consent and acquiescence of your brethren of this Presbytery; but which, under their present solemn conviction of duty and responsibility to the Great Head of the Church, they believe ought never to have been permitted, and which they are therefore now desirous should continue no longer.

Has not the Board in fact undertaken to discharge that spiritual government and oversight which primarily upon earth pertains only and exclusively to this Presbytery? Has it not instructed you where to go and labour, how to proceed, and what to teach, and to whom you are to minister?

Not that it has done these things without consulting you and hearing the expression of your views, feelings, and reasons; but is not the judgment of that government ecclesiastically authoritative and conclusive? Are not its instructions binding upon all the Missionaries of the Board in spiritual things?

And are not these the very subjects committed by the Word of the Lord to the deliberation and judgment of Presbytery only? Is there such a thing in the Presbyterian system as an "imperium in imperio?" Suppose contrary instructions from your Presbytery and the Board? If you obey the Board, you disobey the Presbytery, and "c converso." -- You cannot in things ecclesiastical serve two masters.

---

the United States in 1845 who stood so high in the estimation of his Presbytery, and who could have acted as independently in regard to his Presbytery, as James Henley Thornwell. But, called to the Second Presbyterian Church of the City of Baltimore, and having accepted, and having had the removal approved by his Presbytery and the Presbytery's formal papers dismissing him to Baltimore in his hands, Thornwell was delayed in his departure by a rule of the College of South Carolina. During the period of delay his Presbytery had second thoughts and revoked his permission to go to Baltimore -- an action so rare as to be unheard of, however theoretically possible. (Palmer, Life of JHT, pp 267-283.)

Thornwell obeyed.

Harmony Presbytery having never troubled its head before as to the advisability or inadvisability or the right and wrong of anything its ordained member Wilson had ever done as an ordained minister since the day they ordained him and he took his farewells to go off to begin his work as a new missionary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the latent opposition of authorities had never become actual.

To bring out the underlying radical conflict of authority in a situation where by default of one party the true situation had never been visualized, the Committee proceeded to pose two hypothetical letters of instructions, one from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and one from Harmony Presbytery.

"Imagine," they suggested to Wilson, that "you were to receive a letter of instructions from the executive faculty of the A.B.C.F.M., breathing the same spirit and the same tenor as the following: --"

> "Rev. and Dear Sir,--
>
> "You will proceed, according to your former written instructions, and as soon as may be, gather all the children you can get into schools, and teach them letters, writing, arithmetic, geography, and, as they are capable, the higher departments in literature, the arts and sciences.
>
> "Be watchful daily to inculcate upon their tender minds the great truths of our holy religion; they will then be nursed and fed on the milk and bread of knowledge of good and evil, and will never be ignorant and debased barbarians. Prevention is better than cure; and moreover they will be a leaven that will work in the lump of Paganism around them: in its gradual transformation to the form of civilization and Christianity.
>
> "In your public ministrations preach the great principles of a practical Christianity; preach the

substance, the spirit, and life of the Gospel, and trouble not yourself about mere forms in doctrine or worship; and avoid as much as may be all useless refinements, unmeaning distinctions, vain jangling, and words that tend to controversy, shun all disputes about words and the meaning of Scripture terms; give the spirit and truth, the essence of the Gospel; study the things that make for peace, shun all narrow and sectarian bigotry, maintain a christian and ministerial fellowship with all evangelical Missionaries, and inculcate a liberal Christianity on a broad scale.

"....In concluding our remarks upon Christian doctrine and the government of the Church, we would observe that we have been constrained to utter them in a general manner, from the position we occupy in relation to the Board --

"We, of course, as Ministers and Christians, have our personal convictions touching faith and practice on these momentous subjects; and were we free from the peculiar embarrassments of our official responsibilities, and believed and realized that we Ministers were all brethren and have only one Lord and Master, we should rejoice to dwell here, and here in this mount to make us tabernacles.

"But we are not on the mount of privileges, and are yet in the house of bondage; and until we put off this fleshy tabernacle and all houses made with hands, we cannot fully realize that glorious liberty of the children of God, to which we are called. We are now acting as the official organs of several denominations, some of whom have different views of Church Government and Discipline, and perhaps also in the manner or form of doctrine.

"There are not a few of our most influential friends who wholly oppose all Creeds and Confessions, and there are others again whose doctrine of faith is not so well defined or distinctly expressed as to enable us, in the exercise of our public functions clearly to speak the mind of the spirit that is in the body of our system. We are thus shut up in the points of our Creed and Church Government to the necessity of dealing in general terms, and of leaving those who differ to go each his own way. Were we to speak our own private convictions from these "high places" of Zion, we should betray the trust committed to our hands, and sow seeds of discord among brethren.

. . . .

The Committee in thus framing the opening remarks of a hypothetical letter of instructions from the ABCFM were taking the line which that Board and its friends had in fact been taking, as their later documentation was to show.

Immediately -- not immediately, perhaps, as the Twentieth Century measures immediately, but after not more than a column or two further on the theological dimension, -- the Committee proceeds to another area which brings definite reactions on one side or another from most present-day Presbyterians exposed with judicious restraint to portions of this eight-foot-long clipping:

> "You must not imagine, [the ABCFM is held up as saying in its hypothetical letter addressed to its very real missionary John Leighton Wilson,] that your Mission is to individuals merely for their particular salvation. You must have a more comprehensive understanding of its true end. Your trust also embraces the general welfare of the people to whom you are sent in temporal as well as eternal things. Your Mission is to do good and avert evil; let none to whom you minister imagine that adversity of "any kind" is, as a general rule, a condition favorable to spiritual Christianity; for the history of all Christian nations prove that Christianity flourishes best among a flourishing people.
>
> "You will not consider yourself sent to individuals only, but your charge also involves the general welfare of the people as a community or nation; and whether among savages, semi-barbarians, or civilized Pagans, there are difficulties in their intellectual and social condition to be removed.
>
> "Some may have no written language, no wise laws, no intellectual or moral culture, no security for property, no arts, no politics, no agriculture, commerce, or manufactures. In short they may be "poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked, and in want of all things." As a missionary of benevolence you will do them all the good you can.
>
> Among such a people all things are to be made new, created anew, or reconstructed on new foundations.

> Even in civilized countries, that are unchristian, there is much, very much in their institutions, manners, and customs, to be reformed, and all these achievements are to be accomplished before Christianity can have a permanent home among them, and be established upon enduring foundations. Christianity will not dwell with ignorance, poverty, and barbarism. It is a fixed point with us that civilization must be established not as the basis, but as a "sine qua non," for without it no human superstructure can stand, nor can the foundations remain.

One beauty of the Committee's work here lies precisely in the measure with which we detest or applaud their summary of the leading principles of the ABCFM. Had they been less acute in summarizing their view of their opponents, our reactions would be bland, impartial, and their subject would be of little more than an antiquarian interest to us.

"[W]hat think you?

> "Having set all your negroes free, remember that you yourself may also be free from the bondage of a wife. That is to say if she leave you willingly, there is no divine law to <u>compel</u> you to take her back. Suppose she were to <u>prefer</u> to return to South Carolina and (as you have parted with all her property) be supported by your family and friends. In short would it not be well in the Missionary life to emulate the single independence of Paul? If celibacy were adopted voluntarily (we object to Popish vows) by all our Missionaries, this simple operation would quadruple our resources for active operations. You perceive the bearing of the principle upon our available faculties.

Touching on abolition, the hypothetical ABCFM letter goes on to mention the importance of "popular lectures" on missions to reach those interested more in geography than in religion, by which means "intelligent and patriotic individuals may become interested in the cause[;] we shall shun the rock of sectarianism, and give the whole movement a diffuse and Catholic character. -- From the experiments made at the Odeon, and New York[,] we look for cheering results from this enterprise."

Coit wanted the work of missions to be the work of men, of men in Presbytery going back to their churches, and not continued as overwhelmingly the concern of no more than the women and children of the Christian community. The hypothetical letter goes on to make much of the busily organized Missionary Societies for Children. Further, "[w]e encourage young Misses at boarding schools, and even educated, intelligent, and accomplished young ladies to make fancy articles and ply the needle in our behalf. Next to the children we pay special attention to the ladies, especially to the wives of pastors...."

Like all mission undertakings, the ABCFM needed all the income it could get. Three of its best sources of funds come in for brief but pointed mention in the letter Coit's committee framed for the Board:

> "We realise as usual considerable sums from the sale of honorary membership; and also from the practice of baptising children in our missionary schools, into the names of their benevolent benefactors who support them; only to think of it: Timothy Diddle and Jeremiah Twopenny in Bombay or Ceylon! The thing cannot be resisted.
>
> "O fond attempt to give a deathless lot
> To names ignoble, yet not to be forgot"
>
> "There is another contingent but valuable source of revenue to which special attention has been of late directed. We mean devises and bequests. The benevolent intentions of deceased testators in behalf of the Board are often defeated by fraud or neglect. A permanent system of policy will probably be adopted through local agents, ministers and other friends to see that no injustice is done us hereafter by the widows, orphans, or other kindred of our deceased benefactors."

By now, of course, so many tracts of ground had been covered in this picture of ABCFM principles for mission, as held up by the Committee of Harmony Presbytery so unfriendly

to the Boston-based Society, that the dormant suspicion of the reader would have long since awakened into mistrust that the Presbyterians were making a great deal of this up out of whole cloth.

Scholarship, however, was ever the personal pride of the properly prepared Presbyterian pastor. No letter so full of allegations as this one was to set out for Africa without its documentation.

> That instructions, doctrine in religion, and moral maxims of the above spirit and tenor should emanate from the A.B.C.F.M. is not wholly a chimerical supposition, we might show abundantly by reference to their public documents. But we are content, for the present, to rest its fairness upon the single number of the "Missionary Herald" for November 1842 containing their own report of the proceedings of the Board at its last anniversary.

And so, with a week intervening to attend on the worship of God and to digest these preliminary limnations of the Coit Committee's views on basic Mission Administration, we should be ready to tackle Installment II.

* * * *

Life, however, is too short in our century for many of us to afford the luxury of a <u>complete</u> immersion in even so fluent an author as J. C. Coit, aided and abetted by a committee of Harmony Presbytery. For our purposes the next eight installments of the Letter to John Leighton Wilson may be analyzed and excerpted even more briefly, now that we have gotten some sense of its way of getting at a point.

Installment II is as long as Installment I, and in an entirely different vein. The hypothetical Letter from the ABCFM cited little scripture by chapter and verse, but continually and subtly or unsubtly couched itself in nearly scriptural language -- nearly, but always and deliberately

not quite, fading off into antiscriptural changes that rang much louder in the ears of the average Presbyterian minister of 1843 than of 1973. By contrast the hypothetical Letter from the Presbytery of Harmony is steeped in scripture. By the standards of any century it is an impressive production.

It makes one opening statement, the basic premise of Coit's view of the Minister of the Gospel as Missionary, and then proceeds to a melting, majestic, overpowering description of the character and work of a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

TO THE REV. JOHN LEIGHTON WILSON,[18]
Missionary, Gamboon, Western Africa.
[continued.]

"Rev. and Dear Brother,-- As you have been called to the work of a Foreign Missionary, we exhort you to be faithful in the discharge of the duties incumbent on you in that character. You have entered upon no new order in the Ministry, nor have you any new office. The nature of your official duties and responsibilities as a Minister of the Gospel in Africa, is the same as though you were an Evangelist laboring within the bounds of this Presbytery.

"The person who fills the pastoral office, hath in Scripture obtained different names, expressive of his various duties. As he hath the oversight of the flock

---

[18]Until further notice, this and subsequent quotations from the printed form of the letter to John Leighton Wilson are from The Charleston Observer XVII 27, July 8, 1843, Installment II, pages 1 and 2; additional paragraphing supplied on occasion.

Neither Coit nor the Committee of Presbytery would claim originality for either their ideas or their quotations in this section. The attentive reader will identify much from his earlier Presbyterian reading, and much additional matter drawn up in the same vein and style by the Chairman and his Committee.

of Christ, he is termed Bishop. Acts 20:28. As he feeds them with spiritual food, he is termed Pastor. Jer. 3:15. 1 Peter 5:2-4. As he serves Christ in the Church, he is termed Minister. 1 Cor. 4:1. 2 Cor. 3:6. As it is his duty to be grave and prudent and an example to the flock, he is termed Presbyter or Elder. 1 Peter 5:1. Titus 1:5. 1 Tim. 5:1, 17, 19. As he is the messenger of God, he is termed the Angel of the Church. Rev. 2:1, 1:20. 3:6, 7. As he is sent to declare the will of God to sinners and to beseech them to be reconciled to God through Christ, he is termed Ambassador. 2 Cor. 5:20. Ephesians 6:20. And as he dispenses the manifold grace of God and the ordinances instituted by Christ, he is termed Steward of the mysteries of God. Luke 12:42. Titus 1:7. 1 Cor. 4:1,2.

Wilson, the hypothetical Letter from Presbytery continues, will recognize what he has just read; he publicly affirmed his agreement with it at the time his Presbytery ordained him and he signed his name to the Ex Animo statement required of each minister as he was enrolled in the Presbytery.

"To the truth of this ecclesiastical testimony you have set your seal.

"This, then, is the office and character of a Minister of Jesus Christ.

"His true calling and ordination is of God; it is witnessed and declared before men by the putting on of the hands of the Presbytery, and the ordination service recognizes the spiritual nature of the office and its functions.

"He is not a Minister of the Church or of man; but he is God's messenger to the Churches and to men; called and separated from the world and the things of the world, to preach and to teach the things concerning the kingdom of God.

"Officially he has nothing to handle of the things physical, seen, and temporal; but those that are spiritual, unseen, and eternal. He is the Minister of the Word of God which liveth and abideth forever. 1 Peter 1:22-25. Romans 1:1-6. Galatians 1:1-6. Titus 1:1-4. James 1:1. 1 Peter 1:1. 2 Peter 1:1, 2. Jude 1.

Revelations 1:4. Mark 16:15, 16. The minister and servant of God and Jesus Christ our Lord according to the will of God and not man; and according to the word and the power of God, and not according to the word, wisdom, or power of man. 1 Cor. 2 chap.

"He is commanded to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." He is forbidden to "confer with flesh and blood," to trust in his own heart, to lean upon his own understanding, and to seek or depend upon the wisdom, the money, the favor, the glory, or the power that is in the world or in man. Galations 1:15. Proverbs 28:26. Proverbs 3:5. Jeremiah 45:5. Matthew 6:32, 33. 1 Corinthians 1:17-20. 1 Corinthians 3:18. 1 Timothy 6:10, 11. 1 Timothy 6:3-9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14. Galatians 5, 11. Galatians 6:12. Galatians 1:10. 1 Corinthians 1:24-30. Luke 14:33. 1 John 2:15-18

"The minister of the Gospel is forbidden to utter in the name of the Lord his own dreams, or the words of man. He is commanded to preach the Word of God faithfully. Jer. 23:28. -- He is not of the world, but God hath called him out of the world and given him a commission to execute according as it is written. John 15:16-21. John 20:31. His only rule of faith, doctrine, and duty, in his official capacity, is the voice of God speaking to him in the Scriptures. To immortal souls his message is sent, and its issues lay hold of life and death everlasting. Mark 16:16. Matthew 25:46.

From this high platform the hypothetical letter from Presbytery moves into one of the most direct and thorough-going calls to fearless, independent, original, and prophetic ministry ever offered in the Christian church:

> "His office is spiritual, and all its appropriate functions are so likewise; he must not in matters of official duty receive any writings as authority since the writings of the Apostles; he must not hear the voice of the Church, for he is the messenger of God to the Churches; he must not hearken to the testimony of the Fathers of old who now sleep in Jesus; nor to the word of wisdom and experience that is in the venerable fathers who are now wide awake; and who see, and know, and are able to teach the ambassador of another what it is good for him to say and to do in the public discharge of his functions; notwithstanding his own

master hath whispered in his own ear how he is to act and what he is to publish in His name. Matthew 10:26, 27.

"A Minister of the Lord Jesus Christ must not devise, plan, or scheme for himself, nor listen to the voice of those who do so for him. He must cast away from him all the "commandments of men and the traditions of the Elders." Mark 7:8, 9. 1 Peter 1:18. Matthew 3:17. Matthew 28:20. What think you? "When the Son of Man cometh shall he find faith on the earth?" Luke 18:8. "When he came to his own his own received him not."

"His own disciples and servants (according to the word of the law) had freely chosen their own Teachers and Lords, and were zealously doing their works -- the learned doctors of divinity, the pious and venerable elders, the active, enterprising, and influential rulers -- these were the gods of the people, they believed in these men and these men believed in themselves, and in the traditions of the reigning hierarchy, and thus the blind leading the blind had all fallen together into the ditch. Luke 11:52. Luke 18:10. The Scribes and the Pharisees were the lawful teachers, but they did not teach according to the word of the law. Matthew 15:6. That required them to read the Scripture distinctly to give the sense of the words, and cause the people to understand the reading, so that they might hear and observe the words of the law, and do them, (Deut. 12:8, also 13 chap. Neh. 8 and 9 chapters,) and thus worship God by keeping his commandmants. The Scribes and the Pharisees boasted in the law; it was their peculiar glory; yet, it was true that they said and did not; and that they did in truth neither believe in Moses (Matt. 23:2, 3. John 5:46. Mark 12:24, 27,) nor keep the law.

"If we will read what is written of these masters in Israel, we shall see their error. The dispensation of Moses was a ministration of the letter. It was good to hear and to do exactly as it was written. This was "doing good" -- these were good works --for they were done in obedience to the Word of the Lord. 1 Cor. 7:19. Now the generation of masters in Israel believed they understood the object and end, the philosophy, the good in the law -- (John 7:47-50. Romans 2:17-29. Matthew 15:14. Matthew 23:16, 17, 19, 24. John 9:34, 40, 41. Luke 11:46) -- this their own knowledge of the good, this their wisdom they taught the people. Not that they denied the written law; they read it every Sabbath day,

and yet their faith was not in the words of Moses, (John 5:46,47.) but in their own knowledge of the good, the wisdom, and the power that was in the law.

"What seemed good then in the eyes of this generation, whether dreaming about Moses and the prophets, or pondering upon a priori principles, or practical results, these (from age to age) these their thoughts they delivered to the people for them to observe and to do in the worship of God, (Matt. 15:8, 9,) and thus their word usurped the place of God's word; and to do their works was to "do good." Isaiah 55:6-12. Isaiah 5:14-26. Psalm 99:8. Psalm 106:29, 39. Matthew 23:2. Isaiah 59:12-16. Jeremiah 14:14.

"Thus it is that such teachers take away "the key of knowledge," (Luke 11:52-54,) and "professing themselves to be wise they become fools, change the truth of God into a lie, and worship and serve the creature more than the Creator." Their doctrine is theirs, the works are theirs, the captive people are theirs. 1 Peter 1:18. 2 Peter 2:3. It is this generation of Ministers and teachers who reign in the Church of the living God, who of all other men are the objects of woes the most terrible ever pronounced by the Lord Jesus. Luke 11:51. In all ages of the Church they have opposed the dominion of God, and resisted the Holy Ghost, by removing the word of the Lamb, and substituting their own words and their own works in its place. Acts 6:13-15. Acts 7:1, 2, 51-60. Mark 7:7. Colossians 2:22, 23. 2 Peter 2 chap.

"In the inscrutable wisdom and righteous Providence of God, (in the administration of his kingdom among men,) he hath delivered his word, and those who hear and keep it, into the hands of this generation. The prophets who spake the word in the name of the Lord were persecuted and slain by this generation. When Jesus himself delivered the word in his doctrine to the wisdom and sensibilities of this generation, they were offended; they execrated it, and exclaimed, folly, madness, blasphemy; and when the incarnate Word delivered himself into the hands of this generation, they judged him "guilty of death;" and when his Apostles preached the word of the gospel of the kingdom, they were imprisoned, stoned, and killed by this generation, for "speaking the words of life;" and it is written that the same tribulations in the flesh await those who in spirit and in truth worship God and keep his commandments, from the children of the same generation; so long as he shall give them power upon the earth. Matthew 23 chap. Revelations 13:7-11. Acts 4:1-3, 16-31. Acts 5:17-19, 21, 40.

Acts 7:51-60. Acts 8:1. Acts 14:2. Acts 12:2, 3. Jeremiah 23:28. John 9:1-35. Mark 12:38-41. Luke 20:45-47. Romans 2:17-24. Luke 11:37-54. Acts 15:5-12. Galatians 6:13. Acts 24:5. Luke 6:7-12. Mark 14:54-66. Mark 15:1. James 5:10. John 16:1-5. Matthew 15:1-10. Mark 7:1-13. Jeremiah 6:13. They who reign in religion, who exercise dominion over the soul, who bring the mind and conscience of men into bondage to their words and works, always have a law by which every man ought to die who confesseth himself a servant, a child, an heir of God, and free from all other dominion, but that of Him and his Word, 1 Cor. 7:23. Matthew 11:28-30. Luke 21:12-20. John 19:7.

"These rulers are not mere tyrants and extortioners oppressing the bodies and estates of men; for political and civil tyranny terminates upon the rights and liberties of men -- but priestcraft brings the spirit and the soul into bondage, and thus usurps the royal prerogatives of the Son of God. The signs of the times, brother, constrain us to warn you to beware of dangers and temptations, concerning which our Lord hath so plainly forewarned us, and testified, (Matt. 24:23-26. Matt. 7:15-21. Matt. 10:16-18. Matt. 6:12,) that you may not build your house upon the sand, but as a wise master-builder basing it upon the rock, by this very thing, namely, by "hearing the sayings of Jesus, and doing them." Matt. 7:24-28. These sayings are written in the book and are sufficient for the man of God. 2 Tim. 3:16,17.

"Follow your Lord then in giving heed to every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God; and in passing unheeding by every jot and tittle of word and work that man hath devised out of his mind and heart, pertaining to Christian or ministerial faith or duty. Rev. 22:18, 19. Matt. 5:17-21. Matt. 22:29. Matt. 26:23, 54. Luke 24:25-28, 44, 46. John 5:39.

Nineteenth Century America has often been charged with confusing the Kingdom of God with the manifest destiny of the United States of America, and Nineteenth Century American missionary enterprise at home and abroad has often been charged with undertaking to Westernize, Americanize, and thus Civilize the innocent and defenseless cultures of a world which had to protect itself as best it could from cultural

and national imperialism arriving in the person of the missionary in the form of his religion.

Those who make the charge, and those who hearing it find it plausible, are seldom those who expect to find their views supported in what received and accepted knowledge agrees are the reactionary backwaters of a reactionary church in a reactionary state in a reactionary section. For this reason it is useful to pay particular attention to the passage which follows shortly (again, "shortly" is not the same "shortly" of more recent publications, say, the Readers Digest) in the train of such an incisive call to an independent prophetic ministry in this hypothetical Letter from Harmony Presbytery of 1843 to her Missionary.

> "You say these principles are familiar to every sound Protestant -- we know these words are, but there are many Scribes yet who say and do not -- there are yet foolish builders, who hear the sayings of Jesus and do them not -- there are yet those who know him not, though his Word is read in the churches every Sabbath day -- there are yet those whose minds are blinded, looking for an earthly, a conquering, or reigning Messiah: they expect to see his kingdom, (Luke 18:20,) and cannot receive the words concerning a spiritual, unseen, and reigning Messiah who calls upon his subjects to "follow him" in his humility, his passive obedience to the word, his temptations, his poverty of spirit, his adversity, his death.

Here it comes:

> "There are many now expecting a greater than Solomon in all his glory -- the Messiah of Civilization -- and know not that they who will be glorified together with Jesus must be made conformable to him in his humiliation and sufferings.

The Jews made this mistake, the Coit Committee goes on to say, just as this is the mistake the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions are continuing to make.

We must pause.

This is no small thing. To the Twentieth Century critic of missionary imperialism, national or cultural, it is no small thing, on the grounds that a secular self-deception at best, or hypocrisy at worst, has been interfering with peoples and cultures in the name of Christian missions. To the Twentieth Century critic of western civilization in general, it is no small thing, on the grounds that our Civilization turns out to be its own death, having destroyed beforehand all its rivals.

J. C. Coit and the Missionary Correspondence Committee of Harmony Presbytery, however, held that looking for "a greater than Solomon in all his glory --- the Messiah of Civilization ---" is no small thing because it is an error cutting to the heart of all Christian faith and life.

It is against Christ himself, they said; squarely and profoundly against him.

> "It is this spirit of error which Jesus rebuked in Peter, and pronounced the spirit of Anti-christ savouring of the things of this world, and not the things that be of God. Matt. 16:21-24. Mark 8:31-34. Luke 9:22-37, Acts 13:27, 3:17-18. Luke 23:24. John 16:1-5. Acts 13:26-27. 1 Cor. 2:8. 1 Tim. 1:13.
>
> "Remember that the Christ we preach is Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

As the second installment continues, there is more, much more. Gildersleeve shifts into an even smaller type on page two, having three-quarters of a column of comment himself to make on another aspect of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson's relationship with the American Board. The drive is on past the prophetic, independent culturally free ministry, into the ministry able

to deal with the things of the spirit only to the extent that it remains a ministry undistracted by and unentangled in the things of this world -- political and social and intellectual as well as economic.

> "You then as a faithful minister of Jesus Christ will leave worldly things to worldly men. -- Let the dead bury the dead, but go thou and preach the Kingdom of God, Luke 9:60. The Gospel dispensation is not addressed to a people in their social or political capacity. That was the form of the legal economy by Moses. His administration was national and objective and in this respect its sanctions were natural and temporal.
>
> "The Gospel is not addressed to a people effectually through a social or political [mediation], but it comes directly to the heart and mind of every individual to whom the word of this salvation is sent. "He that believeth &c., he that believeth not," Mark 16:16.

Here the Twentieth Century critic in us takes heart. This is the obscurantism, the false doctrine of the spirituality of the church, which we knew all along was the root of the matter with these people.

But our judgment may be hasty. From Coit's standpoint, building economic, intellectual, political and social civilizations has two fatal flaws.

First, it tears down one bad set of structures to build up another in overconfidence as to the ultimate quality of the new set; and second, it diverts the minister of the Gospel, the servant of the Word, from his real job, a radically different job, the job no one else would ever do if he failed to do it, the one job his Master and his church have set him apart for and sent him out to get done.

> "Beware lest in handling the Word of Jesus you forget that his kingdom is not of this world. John 18:36. The truth and the faith that lay at the foundation of all earthly wisdom and power, are fundamentally different from the truth and the faith that reveals and

perceives the wisdom and the power of God in his kingdom.

On the foundation thus laid, the Committee of Harmony Presbytery proceed in Installment III to outline the message of the missionary. The hypothetical letter of Instructions from Presbytery should not leave a man in doubt as to what he should proclaim.[19]

> "Proclaim then the ultimate foundation of all law, the will of God as a sovereign; tell of the administration of the divine law among men, by the word of the Lord and his providence as a governor; tell of the grounds of his condemning and justifying men, as their judge; tell of the everlasting punishment he inflicts as an avenger of his justice, upon those who reject the dominion of his word; and of the eternal life given to those who are subjected to its reign, by the word and Spirit of God, according to the riches of his grace; tell of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David and the son of Abraham; tell who Abraham was, how God called him by his word, how Abraham heard and obeyed that word, and so believed things and did things, directly contrary to the most profound natural convictions of truth and goodness in the mind and heart of man, Gen. 12:1-5. Heb. 11:8, Gen. 15:1-7. Rom. 4:9-25. Gal. 3 and 4 chapters. Gen. 21:1-20. Heb. 11:17-20, and say this man's faith is represented in God's word as the pattern the model of the faith of all true believers; there is "one faith," Eph. 4:5, the faith of Abraham; and it consists in this, hearing, believing and doing, according to the word of the Lord, by which faith believers live, are justified, sanctified, adopted and saved. Rom. 4:3, 16. Gal. 3:7, 9, 22-29. Heb. 10:38. Rom. 4:5. Acts 26:18. Gal. 3:26. John 18:36[.]

"Many will not listen to your sayings --- they would rather be versed in the genealogies of their own kings, and the succession of their own priests; and the exploits of their own great men; yea," in the too common missionary and

---

[19] Until further notice, all quotations from the Letter are taken from The Charleston Observer, XVII 26, July 15, 1843, pp 1 and 2; additional paragraphing supplied.

pastoral experience of New Englander and South Carolinian alike, "in the pedigree of their dogs and their horses[.]

> "Yet if there are any quickened by the Spirit of God, they will not be insensible nor indifferent to the words concerning the Lord and the things of his kingdom, Acts 1:3; nor to the priesthood which is without succession, nor to the everlasting priest, Heb. 7 and 8 chapters, nor to the sayings of the Prophet, Acts 3:22, 23, nor to the generation of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham, Mat. 19:40. 1 John 4:5, 6. John 10:3, 17:8, 14, 18, 37.
>
> "Tell that the eternal WORD was made flesh and dwelt among us -- that the Law was given by Moses, but grace and truth by Jesus Christ; and that it is of his fullness we all receive; say that no man hath or can see God at any time, and that Jesus Christ his only begotten Son alone reveals and declares him to man, by the word that proceedeth out of his mouth, by the spirit of the Father and of the Son....

Time did not fail the Committee of Harmony Presbytery to tell of Isaac and Jacob, of Moses and all the Prophets, of the house of prayer and the den of thieves, of the "fire in his words when denouncing human rulers, false teachers in religion, Matth. 23. chap." Tell your hearers the entire Old Testament and the New, they said, and say nothing of Jesus as a legislator, as a judge, or as an avenger of justice, but as a Prince and a Savior, exalted to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins, Acts 5:31.

"As our deliverer from death, and as the Prince of Life, crucified, risen, ascended, and standing at the right hand of God as the great High Priest of our profession" -- thus the missionary should proclaim him.

How best to make sure one's trumpet gives no uncertain sound? By close attention to

> "...the confession and catechisms of our Church, and to our forms of government and discipline as a distinct and

intelligible delineation of the truth of that gospel we believe and preach, and of that government and discipline which we own and to which in things ecclesiastical we submit....

"Teach them, after the manner of Jesus, the first and great commandment. Matt.22:37, 38. Mark 10:18. Mark 12:29, 30. -- The obedience to the first table of the law Jesus sums up as consisting in hearing that the Lord thy God is one Lord, and in loving Him.

. . . .

"The second table of the law involves the consideration of duties relative to man.

"Teach children to honor and obey their parents, and to render a ready and cheerful obedience, as serving God and not man. Eph. 6:1. Col. 2:20. Heb. 12: 9. Prov. 32:22. Matt. 7:10-13.

"Teach parents that they are the Ministers of God in their own households, and that by precept and example they should teach them obedience to the word of God. Eph. 6:4. Proverbs 22:6. 2 Tim. 3:15. Tell them to teach their children the Catechism and to watch over and pray with them. Suffer them not to trust the instruction of their children in the things of God, to volunteers; suffer them to hear no voice in these sacred things but the Pastors and Elders in the Churches, and the father's voice in his own family; warn them to depend on no earthly teacher, but to trust only in the Lord. Eph. 6:14.

The Letter applied scripture to marriage, to the home, to masters, to servants, to citizens, to all the relationships of life, in the firm tradition of the exposition of the Westminister Larger Catechism in its application of the Ten Commandments, leaving no part of life free from the demand of the Word of God. But in no overbearing spirit --

"Imitate your master, and be among the flock as one that serveth, even to the washing of feet; and when they come about you, rejoice only when it is to hear the voice of the good shepherd, that the word of God may have free course and be glorified. Remember that a dispensation of the Gospel is committed unto you.

> "To the weak become as weak that you may gain the weak, become all things to all men that you may gain some, and this do for the Gospel's sake, that you might be partakers therof with us.
>
> "Put away earthly things, and give yourselves wholly to the ministry of the word, for to this end were you called and ordained a prophet and an evangelist to the nations. Determine, therefore, to know nothing among them but Jesus Christ and him crucified. Make full proof of this ministry, fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, and woe be unto you if you preach not the Gospel.
>
> "Teach the theology of Christ, and the morality of Christ, according as it is written.

As the third installment drew to a close, the Committee recapitulated the contrasts between the positions they had been taking in this hypothetical letter from Presbytery, and the positions their earlier hypothetical letter had attributed to the ABCFM. "And should you be subjected to the trial of suffering for the temporal things, we beseech you, in the name of the Lord, to confer with none others concerning giving and receiving, before you have first communicated with your brethren of this Presbytery, and with the Christian people under its care."

There it was. The two hypothetical letters had set forth the contrast in mission philosophy between the Board Wilson was under, and the Presbytery the Committee would prefer him to be under. Before going on into the main body of the letter, the Committee wanted to be clear on the purpose of the ground selected thus far:

> And now, brother, we have laid before you, two letters of instructions, one supposed to have been written by the Committee of the Board, and the other by the Presbytery.
>
> Our object in this is to present in a plain light the truth of our first proposition, by illustrating in

your particular case the practical working of the two systems. We now ask if it is not impossible to maintain your ecclesiastical relations with this Presbytery[20] while you continue in connection with the A.B.C.F.M.?

At the beginning of the next installment the Committee first asks Wilson to examine carefully his situation.[21] It should be clear to him now that he is in an anomolous and

---

[20] Gildersleeve followed this installment with a caveat to the reader:

> [T]he Chairman of the Committee of Harmony Presbytery, informs us that the Committee have not had a meeting since the Letter, as now published, was completed, owing to their distance from each other, and the difficulty of convening them -- that "the Letter which was signed by the Committee, though very voluminous, was yet incomplete -- some important points were merely noted down, though the views of the Committee were distinctly expressed. They authorized their Chairman, however, to go on, fill up the blanks, and publish the Letter in their name."
>
> Understanding that they had concurred in the original draft of the Letter, we took it for granted that there was a concurrence also in the Letter as now in the course of publication; inasmuch as their Chairman was authorized to fill up the blanks and publish it in their name. We make this explanation, not because we presume that there is any dissentient opinion on the subject, but because we regard it as due to all the parties concerned.
>
> The parts of the Letter which appear in this number, and in the last, show that their author is a diligent student of the Scriptures; and they form the materials out of which with a little modification, excellent ordination and installation charges could be framed.

[21] Until further notice, all quotations from the Letter are taken from The Charleston Observer, XVII 27, July 22, 1843, pp 1 and 2; additional paragraphing supplied.

impossible position. He is under two disparate and mutually exclusive authorities.

If he were faced with two such letters of instruction, what could he do? He should think about it in that light. He might decide to obey the Board and trust that Presbytery would overlook the matter. But this, Presbytery could never do. Presbytery would be forced to administer discipline, the end of which (if he defied Presbytery's authority to the breaking point) must be that he would be deposed from the gospel ministry and left in that state, bereft of his calling. He would have the husks of the ABCFM's worldly enterprise, but the great spiritual kingdom would be his no more, and his no more to represent.

Suppose instead that he chose to disobey the Boston Board and to obey his Presbytery? What could the men of Boston do to him? Nothing, except withdraw their material support and leave him on no wages, whereupon his true supporters and governors, his Presbytery, would undertake to supply him with that as well as with his spiritual oversight and comfort.

In the one case he would lose everything that counts. In the other case he would lose the world, so to speak, and gain a far richer inheritance.

What next?

> II. We will now proceed to consider our general proposition that the "Spirit of Missions" in the A.B.C. F.M. is a spirit of delusion, bondage and error, and hostile to the truth and grace of the gospel of Jesus. And we will bring forth in its support such principles and truths from Scripture and such proofs and facts and in such order, as they offer themselves to our minds.

In the Committee's own words, the problem with the ABCFM was essentially this: against all right, the ABCFM cooks its dinner by setting fire to their neighbor's house.

Even if this were not so, it would still be wrong to try to do right by proxy.

> [T]he radical vice in the false "Spirit of Missions" is this; that it proposes to perform moral and personal obligations by a substitute, (not appointed by law, not recognised by law, not known to the law,) or voluntary proxy of its own creation, which debtors to God are invited to choose and to use, that it may perform their duties to their master for them or in their stead. This is the spirit of the unjust steward who denies the nature and extent of the debts of the servants; and to secure a personal influence and support among them, resorts to fraud, imposition and corruption; the steward that bribes the servant with his Lord's money. Luke 16:1-16.

That in itself would be enough. But there is more. "There are two spirits of missions. One is of 'doing good' -- this is what crucified Jesus, and always persecuted his faithful witnesses. -- The other is not a doer of good -- but is a witnessing spirit -- testifying of the goodness which God doeth."

After drawing parallels to civil constitutions, the Committee draws attention to the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church. Then appears a key question. Be all this as it may, can a Christian in good conscience send money under any circumstance to the bad Board?

Once more the Committee marks out pioneer ground. Their answer to this practical question set forth a principle which still flourished a century and a quarter years later.

It was the principle of the Designated Gift, destined for a particular approved object in the midst of a sea of

objects the donor for conscientious reasons could not support. Where conscience has raised her head, Boards have had to honor the designated gift or pass it by with a "No, thank you." And when, in the mid-Twentieth Century, Boards fought free of the designated gift, by means of the powerful engine called Equalization between Benevolent Causes, Boards ran into conscientious protest from the spiritual heirs of J. C. Coit and his Committee of Harmony Presbytery.

The Committee put it this way to Wilson:

> Suppose A. B. has $100 and he wants to do good with it, in the Missionary cause, can he do it by giving his money to the "propaganda de fide" at Rome? [N]o[.] [W]hy? because the faith that college propagates is not <u>his</u> faith.
>
> Could he "do good" by remitting it to a Socinian board? No. Why? Because the <u>gospel</u> of that Board is not the <u>gospel</u> he receives, loves, obeys, and Christ has commanded him to support.
>
> Could he "do good" by sending his cash to the A.B.C.F.M.? No. Why? Because he has no satisfactory knowledge of <u>what gospel</u> that Board does propagate; and yet if they professed the Westminster Confession he could not. Why? Because he does not know one missionary of the Board, and the principles of the Board cause a jealousy rather than a confidence in their works. Moreover the Lord requires of him a reasonable service.
>
> Perhaps he does know <u>one</u> Missionary, and that he has sufficient for his testimony for the cause of truth and righteousnes, his mind, heart, conscience, faith, and hope, are with him; -- and you may ask why may not his prayers and alms be so also? And will it render his offering unclean and unholy to send it to the Board? Not at all. We could and should under such circumstances send our money to the Board, but mark, it would be for C.D. our Missionary, the very man we choose to support, and if every dollar sent to that Board were remitted on this principle the offence of that Board would cease, it would be a mere business house, a factorage in temporal

> things, and the moral, the spiritual, the reasonable service would be rendered by living Christians. This illustration shows at once that the true principle of giving to Missions is fatal to the "Spirit of Missions" that reigns in the A.B.C.F.M.

The installment ends with a review of the situation as it was in 1836, barely seven years before. In the midst of the vast spiral galaxy of Coit's argument, this part of the letter closes with a fine concise summary of the first half of the actual dilemma posed to the American churches by the rise of large benevolent activity. It is cast in the concrete terms of the situation faced by the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America:

> The distribution of ecclesiastical powers as contemplated by our constitution had become deranged, and vast affliated voluntary societies had grown up almost unconsciously among us and over us, which threatened to absorb the whole power and influence of the church, and to substitute a government of the few at the central point of each society for the free action of one popular system; and worse than all, many of the Presbyterian party were so deeply entangled in consequence of past action and capacity and men so little aware of the mischief that threatened them, that they refused to co-operate in the efforts necessary to save our government and church from utter ruin.

The Committee of Harmony Presbytery, we can clearly see, was acutely aware of the first horn of the dilemma: if the Presbyterian Church had let the voluntary benevolent societies continue to absorb all Presbyterian benevolent activity, the center of gravity would have shifted -- was already shifting by 1836 -- so far outside the church as to put into jeopardy the whole concept of the Presbyterian church as a comprehensive system of ecclesiastical government.

Moving on into the 5th Installment, after half a newspaper page or more of texts in support of varied facets of

dissatisfaction with the Spirit of Missions exhibited by the ABCFM, the Committee raises a new question:

> You may ask, if these things are so, why did not the faithful and true Ministers of God and Elders who were present at the anniversary of the Board, lift up their voices against such errors in faith and Christian morals.
>
> We answer, they were not in an Ecclesiastical Synod where they were at liberty to discuss Christian doctrine and practice. They were in the hall of a voluntary society, organized with the express object of excluding such discussions, and met for the one object of celebrating their own achievements and raising a revenue. They were in the palace of an earthly governor and judge.
>
> Under similar circumstances Jesus himself answered nothing; (Matt. 27:12-15,) but they, like the lamb dumb before his shearers, so they opened not the mouth. Matt. 27:12-15. Acts 8:32. The truth is, the whole creation of the A.B.C.F.M. groaneth in bondage, waiting for the manifestation of the glorious liberty of the sons of God.[22]

John Calkins Coit, like most serious Puritans, is strong meat. But it would be unfair to him to leave the impression that he is unrelieved heavy sledding; we should note a few samples of wisdom and wit, illustrative of his apparently inexhaustible enthusiasms as he chaired his Committee and the weeks of publication unrolled before him.

Of Ministers of the Word: "Their office is to speak to the world, not to act upon it, to the end that their king may act through the message they deliver."

---

[22]The Letter of a Committee of Charleston Presbytery, to the Rev. John Leighton Wilson, Installment V, in The Charleston Observer, XVII 28, July 29, 1843. Paragraphing added. Until further notice, all quotations will be from this issue of the newspaper, pp 1 and 2.

Of professors and others who for whatever reason prefer non-propositional thought and theology: "There are abroad in the world professors and ministers of somebody and of some things; but who fight against all Creeds and Confessions; all forms of words or other signs or symbols that will tell whose ministers they are, and what it is they do believe. ---

> ...they cannot be very particular because they are not right sure, sometimes it does rather seem reasonable and so far they believe; and then they rather think and again do not know; when they consider they are often flustered, and sometimes doubt; but upon the whole, "all things considered," they rather guess it will turn out pretty much according to their calculation! This appears to be the form of the open letter in the hand of some who are called Preachers of the Kingdom of God! And if they have any other credentials they are sealed up, and in the foreign office at home, and they cannot speak of their content.

On empty young ministers:

> A.B. is now ordained and wishes to go to the heathen. He goes among the churches. The people hear a great deal about civilization, "the Spirit of Missions," "the devotion and sacrifices of the preacher," funds, tracts, steam presses, doing good, the perishing millions, &c.&c., but little of the doctrine of the kingdom, of the truth, grace, the redemption, the sacrifice, the righteousness, or "the unsearchable riches of Christ." There is no positive heresy in what the man says. But the people feel that there is a vacuum, "an aching void," that there is a want of "the one thing needful."
>
> Ask him about his doctrine, and you draw out an answer like the book, but the doctrine comes not out spontaneously. It lies like the water in Jacob's well, deep, and requiring something to draw with, and is not like the fountain that gushes the living water from the heart.[23]

---

[23] Here is Coit's power to take an image from scripture and apply it in quiet phrases. On the subject of empty men of pleasant seeming, few have ever said so much in so small a space, and never, at the end, with such a poignant crescendo.

On a minister's responsibility: "It forms no part of a bishop's[24] official responsibility to direct the intellectual movements of the people, or to organize or manage mere moral or social or civil reforms. Human politics and morals have practically no series of fixed and immoveable principles, but consist of a succession of ever varying and mixed projects and experiments. The ministers of Christ are not the angels to trouble the waters of these pools, for here are not the healing waters of life.

But the Committee is aware that though all general wisdom from on high be available to a man, he can still have on his mind a more concrete and practical question that is bothering him. With no warning the Letter turns to just such a question. We plunge into the realm of practicalities.

> And now brother you may enquire, if I leave the Board what plan or scheme have the Presbytery to propose?
>
> We answer, none whatever; we have exhorted you not to hear the Board; we now charge you not to hearken to the Presbytery, but we beseech you in Christ's stead to hear the "Son of God, hear ye him," Matt. 17:5.
>
> The church is not the object of your faith; we believe in the church, that is in her existence according to the testimony and the promise of Christ; we believe in the Church that we do not see[; but] Scripture nowhere directs us to believe in the Church or to trust in her, or even to hear her except in matters of private offence and discipline, Matt. 18:17.

The regulative words here are "plan" and "scheme." The Committee is willing to leave all field planning to the field; this is the second great difference between Board administration and Presbytery administration in the Coit

---

[24] That is, an ordained minister's.

Committee proposals, the first being (as we have seen) their difference in philosophy.

There are two ways of looking at this.

On the surface it could seem to be a complete abdication of responsiblity. "What plan or scheme have Presbytery to propose?" "We answer, none whatever."

But underneath there is a radical humility. "We have exhorted you not to hear the Board; we now charge you not to hearken to the Presbytery." The Committee is not attacking the Board out of greed for its power; the things it feels the Board incompetent to handle are in large part the things it feels that no home administration is competent to handle, itself as an administrative body included.

Further, and most important of all, in refusing to work up schemes and plans in some home office of Presbytery to lay on the backs of the working missionary, this Committee by no means intends to throw the missionary loose to his own devices. "We now charge you not to hearken to the Presbytery, but we beseech you in Christ's stead to hear the 'Son of God, hear ye him.'"

Presbytery, in a word, should sustain to the missionary the same administrative relationship she sustains to her pastors: that of a loving father, pointing to the Scripture; that of an inspiring encourager, exhorting her sons and stirring up their hearts; and that of a sure disciplinarian and authoritative court of appeal.

There is another way of putting it, and the Committee shortly restates their position so as to make it clear. It is their view that on the philosophy of mission in general, and on the content of the missionary message in particular,

we are thoroughly and properly in the area which is presbytery's responsibility, and presbytery's alone, to make decisions. The long expositions filling the letter's pages up to this point have made it clear that in all the generalities and all the particulars of that area, Presbytery is competent, responsible and supreme.

But equally important, Presbyterial responsibility is strictly limited to the philosophic and spiritual area. It is no more Presbytery's competence and responsibility to tell the missionary how to run his business outside this area of their competence than it is for Presbytery to tell a pastor whether or not to farm, how to farm, what investments to make against old age, what to wear, how to educate his children, or how to schedule his time in his pastorate. They want a pastor to <u>be</u> a pastor, they want a minister of the gospel to <u>preach</u> the gospel. It is Presbytery's duty to see that he is and that he does; beyond that, and in the details of how he goes about meeting his own local situation, Presbytery would be presumptuous to burden herself and her ministers with meddling; and so it should be with her ministers abroad:

> Were we to write you 100 letters we should dispense the word of God only, and as to temporal, personal, and economical affairs, you must govern yourself by your own prudence, judgement, and good sense, subject to the rule of the word. Go among the towns and villages, then, preaching the doctrine of the kingdom of God, if they will not hear, or they persecute you in one place, go to another, shaking off the dust of your feet as a testimony against them; but watch and "they who have ears to hear let them hear," feed them, preach and teach in season and out of season.

What then of the missionary's financial support? He is to have full freedom to order his temporal affairs in the way his own judgment best advises; but what will provide the wherewithal to have any temporal affairs at all to order?

Where are his clothes, his groceries, his transportation and his rooftree to come from?

Once more the Committee of Harmony Presbytery take an incisive position. It is reminiscent of, but still quite distinct from, the position known in later eras as that of the "Faith" mission.

In a substantial and carefully worded section at the end of the installment, the following principles emerge:

1. Presbytery is not a financial institution; it is not a budgetary center; it is not a treasury. Presbytery is a spiritual body with spiritual responsibilities. If a missionary applies to Presbytery for financial support he should properly expect to hear what the apostles said: "Silver and gold have we none, but such as we have, give we unto thee, 'the name of Jesus Christ,' and in his name we say rise up and walk into the temple."

This principle of Harmony Presbytery's Committee is not so stupid or so Polyanna as it sounds at first blush to those of us who have grown used to thinking of General Assemblies, Synods, and Presbyteries as great budgetary bodies, holding and dispensing millions of dollars in the benevolent operations of the church.

Occasionally a working pastor given membership on one of the Twentieth Century Presbyterian executive agencies will rise, as J. Wayte Fulton arose in the early deliberations of the newly established General Executive Board of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and lay it out to the party politicians and bureaucrats there assembled to run such a Board.

"What you need to realize and understand," he said, "is that the General Assembly has no money. The General Assembly does not give one dollar to the work you are planning for this General Executive Board. Neither are the Synods a source of money. The Synods have no money. The Synods do not give one dollar to the work you are planning for this General Executive Board. Neither do the Presbyteries.

"The only source of funds for your program, and the only place money for it can come from, is the congregations of the church. They alone supply the funds. It is the local church which gives. That is where every dollar comes from.

"Unless you choose men for these staff positions who command the confidence of the local churches, and unless they undertake programs which command the confidence of the local churches, nothing you do here as the General Executive Board will amount to anything."[25]

2. Presbytery is not a bureau. Her responsibility in mission is not that of supplying an outward paraphernalia.

> Well perhaps you will ask about the arrangements, we answer we have made none, we have no schemes or contrivances of our own in the matter.
>
> No well lighted saloons, pictures, galleries, or periodicals, no agents, no popular lectures, no infantine missionary societies, no orders of nice young ladies to ply the needle for our money, and no societies of excellent young men to talk for it at the Odeon, no life memberships for sale, no Christian names for Heathen

---

[25] In the long run there is no way around it, as the Coit Committee letter makes clear; in the free American churches, the only money there is for the support of benevolence work and benevolence workers, is the free offering made by Christians as the Holy Spirit leads them. Presbytery can transmit funds, Presbytery can encourage giving; but Presbytery has no funds and Presbytery can compel no funds.

> children, no Monthly Concerts, no devises or bequests, no Pastor's vows, no family associations, no pledges, no financial credit, no nets or drags, no screwdrivers, wedges, or lever, or other mechanical apparatus, and no steam, wind, or water power, and we have no faith in these operations; nor yet in the much that the rich men cast into the treasury, or the crumbs that fall from their tables, or in the pickings from the aprons of babes, or in the portion of the fatherless, and the widow, or in the spoils of the sepulchres, or in the part of the possessions of Annanias or Saphira, or in the favor of the public.

3. The Guarantee of the missionary's support is in the promise of God who sends him, and the confirmation of his calling will be found in the support God's people give him.

This is a radical and searching position. As the Committee's letter emphasizes, it is no more and no less than the position Presbytery takes in the case of a minister who feels called of the Lord to serve in one of the churches of the Presbytery.

> Our faith is in God only according to his word, and in his faithfulness and in his providence. Doubtless many go forth in his name who suffer need and whom He never sent, and what earthly King would provide for a voluntary ambassador? Jer. 23:21. But we speak of the servants of God[; and] we have never asked the Christian people what they were willing to do. We have no inquisitions in Harmony; we tell them what God will have them to do. They are God's servants, not ours, they are not their own, 1 Cor. 6:19, 20, to their own master they stand or fall, we minister the word as to their obligation to support the gospel and the duty also of watching and praying as they will answer to God every one of them for himself, that he be fully persuaded in his own mind that the Pastor or Evangelist they sustain with their prayers and alms at home or abroad be sound in the faith and have the qualifications God requires of his ministers. We leave their own works to answer for them, not our words.

The Committee, it must be remembered, had approved for transmittal to Wilson one of the most thoroughgoing calls to an independent, untrammeled, prophetic ministry ever composed in all the history of the Presbyterian Church -- the Twentieth Century included. In its fourth principle as developed at the close of this installment, the Committee calls for a parallel independence in material matters, as a necessary protection of the missionary's spiritual independence:

4. Guarantee of the missionary's support by Boards and Agencies, even by Presbyteries, or by any human guarantor, will stifle the missionary's inner freedom to depend on the Lord his true master.

> There may be Sarepta widows and two mite widows, and rich men who have thrown in all their living, and hold it subject to the order of the Lord and some men who have but two coats, who would give one; but we warn you not to depend upon an arm of flesh, when God has graciously given you his word and himself! Maintain your Christian and ministerial INDEPENDENCE in man, and sell not your birthright like profane Esau for a mess of pottage.
>
> It is the duty of the Pastors to inform the churches of the temporal wants of the members of Presbytery whether at home or abroad who are engaged in preaching the word; they who feel it a duty and a privilege to "help after a godly sort" remit their contributions to the Deacon or Treasurer of Presbytery, specifying the mode in which they severally wish them applied[;] and when Presbytery meet they have only to direct their officer to pay it accordingly, unless funds are in hand to be used at the desecration of the body, in which case they will so dispose of them.[26]

---

[26] Gildersleeve's typesetting and proofreading are ordinarily so good, and the convictions of the Committee are so strong on the necessity (where missionary funds are concerned) for mission Presbyteries to be transmitting agents only, that it is a great temptation to believe that the closing lines of this passage as printed in the original and as reproduced here are exactly what

These are high views of missionary calling. It might be supposed that in the real world some more reliable system of organization and support would be required, the ordinary missionary not necessarily being the steady independent flame this view presupposes, the ordinary member of the church being less attentive to the voice of God, his pastor less faithful in urging him to pay attention to that voice in matters of mission.

The Committee of Harmony Presbytery would reply, as it had been insisting throughout their paper, that it was precisely the low view of the fainthearted and of the blind, embodied in platforms and systems like those of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, that tended to produce just such ordinary missionaries and just such inattentive people, under just such less than faithful pastors.

The whole intention of their program was to go back to first principles and build Christian mission work, Presbyterian mission work, on right foundations, which alone can produce and maintain men and people afire with that true and steady flame.

* * * * * * *

So much, then, for the choice between working under the platform and protection of the ABCFM and working under the

---

the Committee intended. It was usually no more in Coit's mind than in Thornwell's to assign to the courts of the church a discretionary authority!

Reluctant candor compels the admission, however, that Coit wrote Gildersleeve to correct the typesetter's error. The word should have been "discretion." See below, p 311, Footnote 32.

platform and encouragement of the Presbytery of Harmony.

But what of the third alternative?

> You may perhaps deem it more judicious if you dissolve your connection with the A.B.C.F.M. to connect yourself with the Board of Foreign Missions of the General Assembly[.] [W]e think not -- and will now proceed to consider that question.

This would be the main theme of the next installment.[27]

It opens with more on the American Board.

After two and a half columns of detailed documentation of ABCFM positions from the Missionary Herald for November, 1842, the Letter has at this point done its best to make it clear that, judged by the evidence of its official publication reporting its official actions, the ABCFM is no fit body.

Perhaps the Presbyterian Church's own Board of Foreign Missions would be better? Surely it must be better. We would hope that it could not help being better.

No, says the Committee of Harmony Presbytery. "We confess that we have no more love for the Board of the Assembly, than for the A. B. C. F. M.[;] but rather more 'carefulness, more clearing of ourselves, yea more indignation, vehement desire, zeal, and revenge.' 2 Cor 7:10, 11; for this Board was given to the church by her own friends; and

---

[27] Installment VI of the Letter to Wilson, in The Charleston Observer, XVII 34, August 26, 1843, is by far the longest. Gildersleeve set it in 4-point, about half the size used in the 1970s for telephone directories of large cities. The scholar can test his eyes and his age on it with little difficulty. Until further notice, all quotations are from this issue of the newspaper, pp 1 and 2. Additional paragraphing supplied.

though we of the household knew it not, yet in this behalf we too have been foes, yet we did it in ignorance and unbelief."

Why?

The Committee are agreed on the Old School Presbyterian position that "it is the duty of the Church, in her 'ECCLESIASTICAL CAPACITY' to conduct the work of Foreign Missions." And for a time the phrase "ecclesiastical capacity" had deceived them into thinking that a Board appointed by the General Assembly was the church at work in her ecclesiastical capacity.

We had not realized, the Committee says, that the "ecclesiastical capacity of the church was the capacity of the church <u>herself</u>, as <u>God</u> made her; and confounded <u>her</u> with the <u>Board</u> which she made <u>herself</u> with her own hands."

What then does ecclesiastical capacity mean? The answer is interesting, because it offers a solution to the criticism which was to continue to be showered on the reformers throughout the next seventeen years, and which is still today for most people the most appealing reason for retaining the mission board system. How could a General Assembly, the question would be raised, possibly administer foreign missions except through some continuing executive agency? The General Assembly's ecclesiastical capacity, if the phrase meant anything at all, must obviously mean the capacity to get the work done by some organ responsible to herself -- so the criticism read then, and still reads now. But this organ might turn out to be an independent agent not itself the Church. The Committee of Harmony Presbytery cut the Gordian knot without hesitation.

> By ecclesiastical capacity then we understand that the church, through her judicatories, should hear,

minister, and declare the word of the Lord, his plan of missionary operations; and that the ministers, elders, deacons and people, who are the living members of the body, should each for himself hear and obey the word, that every one should do "what his hand findeth to do, with his might," Eccl. 9:10. Rom. 12:4-19.

That the ministers, and elders, in church courts should testify to the truth of the Gospel, by their witnessing and by their discipline; warning, reproving and correcting, that Christian faith and practice should be maintained in the household, and the gospel of the Lord declared.

That the church courts should handle nothing but spiritual things; and that the ministers, elders, deacons and members in their personal and Christian capacity, should support the doctrine and discipline of the Judicatories, by their prayers, testimony and deportment, and every one also by their contributions to the maintainance of those who preach the gospel; at home or abroad, distinguishing in every case carefully in this matter as serving God, and not man.

Administration, in all the bureaucratic sense of the word, simply vanishes so far as the responsibility of the organized church courts are concerned:

> This then we understand to be "ecclesiastical capacity," when every member, according as God hath placed it in the body[,] is performing its own function -- When the eye is seeing, and the ear is hearing, and the foot is walking, and the hand is working, and the heart is rejoicing or sorrowing, and all the members sympathising and moving together, according to the word of the Lord, 1 Cor. 12 chap. This is "ecclesiastical capacity," nothing but this, when every one is taught to do and doeth himself his own duty, and refuseth to purchase an indulgence with money. A capacity where the form of the performance corresponds to the nature of the obligation. A good soldier of Christ shoulders his own musket, and does not hire a substitute in this warfare. 2 Tim 3:16, 17.

They are serious about it:

> The constituent elements of a Christian church are

> bishops,[28] ruling elders, deacons and people; and when according to this distribution, each for himself, officially and personally, is hearing and obeying the word of God, then the Church is performing her appropriate functions ecclesiastically.

Accustomed as we are to nearly a century and a half of large-scale Presbyterian administrative structures, this solution carries an overwhelming first impression to our minds of oversimplification, of dodging the issue. Again the judgment may be hasty. The Committee was not thrashing around in the dark, looking for simple solutions and easily charmed by the merely simplistic. In a long and carefully worded chain of reasoning they address themselves to the basic question of Presbytery's nature and power, and to the power of her related bodies, Synod and General Assembly. We may analyze it as follows:

All governmental action or function, they note, is either legislative, administrative, or judicial. Presbytery cannot be legislative; in matters of faith and life God has spoken. His church cannot add or subtract from his word except at peril to her true nature. Presbytery cannot be administrative. She has no power or authority to enforce legislation, not even the legislation of God. She can issue a judgment, but she has no bailiff, no sheriff, no militia, no police, no gendarmerie, no armed forces, to <u>enforce</u> so much as a jot of her judgment.

What then is her authority and function?

> Having made these observations concerning the nature of government and its divisions, into legislative, judicial, and executive, let us examine what is the kind of govennment or administration Christ hath

---

[28]That is, ordained ministers.

> imposed upon the Church, and committed to the hands of ecclesiastical rulers.
>
> We affirm, then, that it is purely JUDICIAL, and that declarative and ministerial only, and that the Church Government possesses not a particle of strictly legislative power, nor any power whatever of executive administration -- it has declarative, not exacting or executing powers. This principle is expressly again and again set forth in our Standards[.] Confession of Faith, ch 11, sec. 2. Form of Government, ch. i. sec 7 ch viii sec 2.

The Committee goes on to trace this principle and its application out, chapter and verse, throughout the whole Presbyterian system from top to bottom.[29]

This was an acute observation. From earliest formulation in this country, the Presbyterian conclaves of ministers and elders are called judicatories and courts. They judge. Either foreign mission work must be carried out by the church

---

[29] Any serious study of the Theology of Mission must lie open to serious criticism if it has not dealt both with the issues raised by John Calkins Coit and the Committee of Harmony Presbytery in their correspondence with John Leighton Wilson, and with the radical analyses and solutions which they propose.

The present study is limited primarily to the issues and analysis of the document as related to the ongoing debate in the Old School Presbyterian Church of the period, and does not attempt to deal with it in its wider and deeper theological context.

The full text is found in the Charleston Observer issues cited in the text of this chapter; these are at present (1977) available at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina; at other repositories holding the cited issues of The Charleston Observer from the years 1843-1845; and on microfilm available from the Historical Foundation and from certain of the Theological Seminary Libraries of the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

in some other way than by her purely ministerial, declarative, judicial courts, or else the courts must be clothed with powers hitherto foreign to their nature. J. C. Coit and the Committee of Harmony Presbytery saw into the heart of this situation. Their solution was to reduce the administrative burden markedly 1) by transferring the bulk of it to the missionaries, who as missionaries would be as free to make their own temporal and strategic arrangements as they would have been as pastors in the United States, and 2) by distributing the remainder of the administrative burden amongst the members and officers of the church in their individual and personal responsibilities to hear the word of God and supply the necessities of his saints as the Holy Spirit should instruct them.

They were not about to solve the problem by altering the powers of the courts. On the contrary, they rightly observed that the structures for the administration of mission which had been created by the General Assembly not only constituted an undoubted problem from the standpoint of practical accountability, they were also a major alteration in the fundamental constitution of the Presbyterian church. In erecting them the courts had embarked on legislation and administration. Where this would end, the Committee of Harmony Presbytery did not undertake to prophesy, but it had already led to results which they felt to be indefensible enough to merit all their powers of counter-attack. "As they have no authority to do these things," we pronounce the system one "founded wholly on sheer usurpation, which ought to be resisted in faithfulness to God, the purity of the Church, and the spiritual welfare of his people."

But where it would soon lead to, long before the end, was clear enough:

> All that will remain for the Churches and Presbyteries to do in these Missions is to pay the levies into the ex-chequer of the Boards, and to furnish their quota of men for the service; and this looks very much like the condition of subjects, who have a supreme executive government, to which they owe tribute, and honor, and fear, and custom, (Rom. 13:7,) that the government may "do good."

When the chief moral duty of the Presbyterian had become a loyal financial support of his General Assembly's Board, where would be the place for the conscientious dissenter? His theology and his morality individual and social might be beyond reproach, but what would happen when he chose otherwise than to support the General Assembly's Board? Ninety years before the fact, the Committee thought they knew:

> The General Assembly have not hesitated to exercise inquisitorial powers to enforce their enactments in behalf of their idols [the Boards]. As a judicial body, they may doubtless send for persons and papers, and prove a delinquency that amounts to an "offence," but it is a monstrous outrage on the liberties of Presbyterians, of ministers and churches to put them to the question, and if they have not obeyed the orders of Assembly, and contributed to the [Assembly's] Boards, to "cast out their names as evil."[30]

In sum, "if the Boards establish their lines as laid down in the maps of the General Assembly, then all the land-

---

[30]See Lefferts A. Loetscher, The Broadening Church, pp 151-154, for an account of the deposition of Presbyterian ministers from the ministry for their refusal to obey orders from the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America to cease and desist from their support and operation of a Board of Foreign Missions independent of, and opposed to the policies of, the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, the same Board which draws such strong criticism here from the Committee of Harmony Presbytery.

marks our fathers have made are removed and there is nothing to prevent the Government officers, tax collectors and agents roaming at large over our whole territory as lords of the realm."

We may conclude that the Committee of Harmony Presbytery, led by its chairman, John Calkins Coit, had clearly discerned the second horn of the dilemma posed the American Churches of the Nineteenth Century by the rise of large works of benevolence: if they took the works into their own ecclesiastical structures, the changes implicit stood fair to transform the churches into something quite unlike what they had been before.

We find that since they are committed to large benevolent works, and unwilling either to leave them outside the church or to see them destroy the fabric of the church, the Committee of Harmony Presbytery therefore has proposed a radically different solution.

Their solution, as we see it, was intended to solve more than the administrative and executive questions. It was a solution true, as they saw it, to the profoundest insights of the Presbyterian system; to the call of God to his people for a lively witness; and to the nature of the Church and all her component parts.

* * * * * * *

In the final installment of the long serialized letter addressed to the Reverend John Leighton Wilson from the Committee of Harmony Presbytery appointed to correspond with him with a view to his severing his connection with the

American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, under which he was serving as a missionary in the tropics of western Africa, and encouraging him to pioneer in becoming entirely dependent on his home Presbytery of Harmony, the Committee under the leadership of its Chairman, the Reverend John Calkins Coit, ranged over territory previously covered, as well as over new territory.

Some of the ideas, sentiments, and statements expressed are interesting either as summarizing aspects of the Committee's position, or furnishing aphorisms and concise two-liners worth pulling out and placing here for more general exposure than they are afforded in their present resting place in the pages of a long forgotten Presbyterian weekly newspaper published at the confluence of the Ashley and the Cooper Rivers as they unite to form the Atlantic Ocean. Among them we may include these:

On Presbyterian centralization: "Nothing is further from Presbyterianism than a system of centralization for religious action. Common measures and union for testimony concerning Christian faith or practice is one thing, for action quite another."

On people left to themselves: "It is said, 'Our people will do nothing if left to themselves.' So we say; but is leaving them to God's management, to his word and Spirit, leaving them to themselves? Are the 'little ones' even not safer in the arms and with the blessing of Jesus, than in the embraces and under the benediction of the chief priests? Mark 10:16."

On how not to cure certain evils: "The evils that

spring from spiritual causes cannot be cured by

money
Boards
<u>resolutions</u> of ecclesiastical bodies
big <u>professions</u> of love of the truth.

They can be cured by

<u>believing</u> the truth
confession of sin
repentance
<u>obeying</u> the truth.

The disease is at the heart, and to the heart must we apply the remedy. -- 'My son, give me thine heart.'"

<u>On the number one priority of Boards</u>: "The whole energies of the Boards are concentrated to establish <u>confidence in themselves</u>; hence all the proofs and facts in their reports conspire to this end; <u>their</u> plans, <u>their</u> missionaries, <u>their</u> officers, <u>their</u> self-denials and sacrifices, with <u>their</u> schools, results, conversions, and wonderful works. The spirit of their prophecy is THEIR TESTIMONY FOR THEMSELVES."

<u>On organizational faith</u>: "They all demand faith from the people in themselves, they all cry for money, and preach the religious obligation to pay it."

<u>On a Christian's responsibilities under the Board system</u>: "He has nothing to do personally, and is not permitted to testify of the doctrines of Christ, as this would tend to controversy, and disturb the peace and prosperity of the great benevolent institutions."

<u>On the test of a Christian's piety</u>: "The reality and degree of his vital piety is reported according to the amount

of money he gives the Societies. This is applied as the practical test to men and churches."

On the great issue of our times: "The great issue in our day is not between Popedom and the Roman empire -- the Pope and Kings -- the Church and the State -- but between 'the christianity of the human race' and the christianity of the son of God."

On the death of united confession: "Protestants reject the confession [of their faith] as the bond of union, and unite to 'do good.'"

On our own fallibility and the cure for it: "We ourselves may be erroneous in point of fact or principle, though we know it not; and if we are, let us be put right by the Word of God; and we are bound, if the offence be a right hand or a right eye, to cut it off, pluck it out, and cast it from us."[31]

In conclusion, the Committee repeats its direct appeal to their fellow presbyter on the Gaboon River.

> We, personally, are comparable to children, (Jer. 1:6-7,) to earthern vessels, 2 Cor. 4;7. We ourselves are nothing, (1 Cor. 3:5-8,) and for this end that our ministration of the Word should stand in the truth, spirit, and power of God only. 1 Thess. 2:13. If then we preach the words of the Lord, and you are of God, you will hear them. John 8:43-47. John 12:47. John 14:24. Acts 3:23.
>
> Thus ministering as the government of the Church and the ordinance of God, if you reject our message you

---

[31] The above selections, and all quotations and excerpts until further notice, come from the last Installment of the Letter to John Leighton Wilson from the Committee of Harmony Presbytery, in The Charleston Observer, XVII:35, September 2, 1843, pp 1 and 2. Additional paragraphing supplied.

reject and despise Him who sent us. Luke 10:16. I Thess. 4:8. "Take heed, therefore, to thyself and to thy doctrine," and to this our warning voice in the name of the Lord -- and that if you turn not, but die in this iniquity, that we have delivered our souls.

But if you have "ears to hear" the word of the Lord, and to come out of the house of your captivity, chained hand and foot, and your "face bound about with a napkin," so that you can neither walk, work, nor speak freely, then will you know what we your fathers and brethren of the Presbytery have been doing unto you in obedience to the word of the Lord, which has come unto us, saying, "loose him and let him go!"

Very affectionately your brethren through faith in Christ Jesus,

J. C. Coit,
Thos. R. English,
William M. Reid,
William Wilson,
Lawrence Prince,
William F. James,
) Committee.[32]

This is a clear, strong, firm, direct appeal. Ruling Elder William Wilson is one of the six signers, and he was

---

[32] In a postscript immediately following the letter, Gildersleeve printed the following note from Coit, intended to clear up any misunderstanding as to how far the sentiments of the letter were the Chairman's only, and how far the Committee had endorsed the letter.

> Rev B Gildersleeve.-- The Committee have been again convened, and adhere to their original subscription to the Letter in the form it has and will pass through the Observer, barring of course typographical errors; as for instance in the paper of the 19th instant it is printed, "hardships of nature," instead of lordship -- "mannerize," instead of maneuvre -- "glory of evil," instead of glory of God -- "we have no imaginations in Harmony," instead of inquisitions -- "desecration of the body," instead of discretion. &c. &c.
>
> Your brother in the faith of the Gospel,
>
> J. C. Coit
>
> Cheraw, August 25, 1843.

John Leighton Wilson's father. We do not have, so far as is known, surviving personal letters on this subject between father and son, and can only guess at what mediation Mr. Wilson may have offered between the thorough, uncompromising position taken by the Committee under the leadership of J. C. Coit, and a more private, personal appeal made from the standpoint of a father. In any case we do have the missionary's formal reply. Far from casting his lot in with the radical approach of his presbytery, John Leighton Wilson chose to stay with the ABCFM -- with reasons stated, as we shall see. After liver trouble finally forced his retirement from Africa, Wilson joined the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions as one of the three Secretaries at the Board Rooms in New York. In the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America he became the first Foreign Mission executive, and for a long term.

Before we evaluate these materials and attempt to assess their place in the mission administration debate as a whole, we should note the careful comments of Benjamin Gildersleeve, and review Wilson's reply from the field.

BENJAMIN GILDERSLEEVE THINKS OTHERWISE

Benjamin Gildersleeve, Sole Proprietor and Editor of The Charleston Observer, has run with patience the entire text of the Harmony Presbytery Committee's letter to their missionary in Africa, John Leighton Wilson. Gildersleeve's reactions to what he has printed are interesting for three reasons.

First, they throw light on the mind and methods of a Presbyterian editor and journalist who in Charleston and Richmond was a prominent figure in the religious press from 1827 to 1860.

Second, like the Committee's letter they are a little-known part of the general debate on mission administration in this period and are an addition to the materials previously collected on the subject.

Third, they are carefully prepared by a mind willing to wait to the end of the series before bringing out its own position, and possess inherent interest as they stand.

Gildersleeve ran his comments on page 2 of the Charleston Observer for September 2, 1843, immediately following the last installment of the letter. He had as usual devoted all of page 1, plus an over-run of about half a page, to the Committee's letter itself. Some idea of the interest and

importance Gildersleeve attached to the subject, and to the Harmony Committee's treatment of it, is indicated by his statement that it was longer by far than anything he had hitherto published in his seventeen years in Charleston.

We may analyze his position as follows:

Without going into the basic principles involved in the document, he would take exception to some of the particulars.

1. For a Committee emphasizing the Standards of the Presbyterian Church, its position is singularly open to criticism made on the basis of the various places in the book of government which clearly give the General Assembly power to conduct missions.

2. If the Committee's idea is to treat its missionaries abroad on the same basis as its missionaries and pastors within its bounds, the notion is impractical. Overseas missionaries simply cannot attend meetings of Presbytery.

3. Since the Letter admits of the possibility of unsound Presbyteries sending unsound missionaries to the field, the Committee have not considered in their Letter the situation of several missionaries, each from a different Presbytery, colliding on the field instead of agreeing.

4. The Form of Government nowhere states that Presbyteries have authority to conduct missions abroad. Yet the Minutes of the General Assembly from 1766 onward afford clear examples of such action by the General Assembly.

5. Further, the Minutes show that Synods and the General Assembly, not Presbyteries, have been the Presbyterian courts conducting missionary work.

6. Further, the Form of Government specifically grants mission authority to the General Assembly.

7. Though these references are to Domestic missions, the principle is the same for Foreign missions.

8. "It would be rather difficult to exceed the strength of the language which the Committee have employed in opposition to the Boards of the Church." If no other Presbyteries agree with them, and neither does Mr. Wilson, they should cut him off and secede as a fragmentary body under the style of "the very latest Reformed Presbyterian Communion." However, before doing so they will, we presume, wait for a while to see what effect has been produced by their labored, and, in many respects, able communication.

9. We think Mr. Wilson is safe from actual process; it will be difficult to prove "atrocious crime" against him, and even if so found by Presbytery, the Synod and General Assembly would be unlikely to sustain the action.

Meanwhile the Committee have utterly failed to prescribe any plan for conducting Missions in the lieu of the one which they labor to subvert.

10. The Committee's conclusions agree in some respects with the Pope's conclusions, which is a surprise. And the Committee's blanket rejection of all Voluntaryism does not recognise that Presbyterians do all things voluntarily in their church.

11. The Committee's rejection of bequests, and of the gifts of children, cuts asunder one of the indispensable sinews for conducting missions on the one hand, and of the important lesson of self-denial for children on the other. As for Agents, the Apostles themselves were the Agents who collected money in one part of their field and carried it to the relief of another.

12. The Committee forget the several limitations on the powers of the Boards: the formation of Synods overseas;

their actual status as mere Committees ad interim of the General Assembly; their vulnerability on the floor of the Assembly to complaints lodged by missions and individuals; and their lack of power to ordain.

13. Of many positions to which we could take exception, perhaps the most glaring is the Committee's opposition to printing presses.

14. Admittedly we "have never before published a communication which has so many Scripture references...."

> There is, however, one reference omitted, or which is so obscurely alluded to, as not to have attracted our attention, of more pertinence than any which has been adduced. It is that in which the Apostle John said, "Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followed not us; and we forbade him because he followed not us. But Jesus said unto him forbid him not -- For there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name that can lightly speak evil of me -- For he that is not against us is on our part." Mark 9:38-40.

15. Finally, the fruits of modern missions speak for themselves.

In concluding his remarks, Gildersleeve takes a charitable attitude towards the Committee, even while making it plain where his considered judgment lies:

> We have thus in a very discursive manner borne our testimony in part upon the subject before us. It is with great pain that we differ from the beloved brethren that compose the Committee. But if they are endowed with light which we are not yet permitted to see, we hope they will bear with us patiently, and not feel wounded at our dullness of apprehension. For at present we should feel very much afraid -- unless inspired of God -- to speak in that confident tone which the letter assumes -- very much afraid, lest in our zeal we were denouncing what God had manifestly approved.
>
> But let it be remembered that God looks not at the outward organization, but at the heart -- And if the

heart goes out in humble, fervent, devout prayer, for the enlargement of Zion, and for the conversion of the heathen, the hand will be ready to contribute for this object, even though a Board should be the almoner of our bounty. And the ministers and churches will find it difficult to convince the world, or even to satisfy their own consciences that they love the Missionary cause, if they make an excuse for neglecting to contribute for this object, that the organization through which their bounty is to be sent is not agreeable to their views of Ecclesiastical order.

HARMONY PRESBYTERY MUTES THE BLAST

As we have seen, the Presbytery of Harmony was in its Presbyterial processes working out its own reactions to the work of its Committee appointed to correspond with John Leighton Wilson on the Gaboon River. The Committee, with an autonomy not unknown to such bodies, and no doubt agreeable to the enthusiasm of its Chairman J. C. Coit for getting its views out before the widest public, where support might be attracted for the new program, had meanwhile been publishing its own views in its own name. It was using the public pages of The Charleston Observer as its channel of communication with Wilson. The last installment of their views as a Committee had appeared in print on September 2, 1843, concluding their long single letter to Wilson which bears the date 1st May, 1843.[1]

The Presbytery of Harmony itself met in Midway Church on April 4th, 5th and 6th, 1844. Here at last, the Presbytery was ready to approve the text of a letter, and did so. In accordance with her custom in view of the extensive circulation of The Charleston Observer among Presbyterians in the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, the Stated Clerk duly forwarded the Minutes of the meeting to Mr. Gildersleeve, who

---

[1]See above, pp 244–312.

printed the Minutes of this Session of the court in their entirety on page 1 of his issue of April 27, 1844.

There for the first time the wider Presbyterian world could read the officially read and approved[2] communication from the Presbytery to their member in Africa, John Leighton Wilson. Its text in its entirety was as follows:

MIDWAY CHURCH, S. C., April 6, 1844.

Rev. and Dear Brother,--

The undersigned are a committee appointed by the Presbytery of Harmony, to correspond with you in relation to your connection, as a Foreign Missionary, with the American Board, and at the same time as a member of this Presbytery; -- and we are instructed by the Presbytery to propose to you the following questions, which Presbytery wish you to answer at your earliest convenience, viz:--

1. Are you willing to dissolve your connection with the American Board of Foreign Missions, and rely in future for your temporal support on this Presbytery?

2. What amount of funds will be necessary to support you, and carry forward your Missionary operations in Africa?

In order that you may intelligently answer these questions, it will be proper briefly to state some of the reasons which have induced the Presbytery to propose them. They are as follows. There is a diversity of opinion in this Presbytery as to the constitutionality of conducting the work of Foreign Missions through the medium of Boards. It is contended that the ministerial and ecclesiastical responsibility of the Missionary, who is in connection with the Board, (which ought always to be his Presbytery,) is intercepted by the Board; that

---

[2]The action, "A communication from the committee of correspondence with the Rev. J. L. Wilson, was read by the chairman of the committee, and the letter directed to be sent to the Rev. J. L. Wilson. The letter reads as follows: -- " establishes the ecclesiastical authority of the text printed and quoted above from the newspaper rendition of the Minutes.

his proper and appropriate work, as a Minister of the Lord Jesus Christ, and as a Missionary of the Cross, is not that of teaching literature and science to the heathen, and printing books, but preaching the everlasting gospel, which is the great appointed means of bringing the world under the dominion of Christ. Now in your case it is desired that your ministerial and ecclesiastical responsibility may be restored to your Presbytery, and that your missionary reports hereafter may be made to your Presbytery, and not to the Board, -- and that for the future you may look to your brethren of the Presbytery for instruction, counsel, and direction.

The Presbytery, desirous of securing united and harmonious action in this great and good work, are willing to pledge themselves to vigorous exertions for your entire support, should it be found practicable, and have therefore directed their Committee to request your answer to the above questions.

The resolution of the Presbytery at its regular meeting last Spring, at Williamsburg, upon which this Letter is founded, is hereto appended, viz:--

Resolved, That J. C. Coit, Thomas R. English, William M. Reid, Ministers, and William Wilson, Laurence Prince, and W. E. James, Elders, be a Committee to open a correspondence with the Rev. J. L. Wilson, a Foreign Missionary, and a member of this body: the scope and end of which correspondence is intended to restore his ministerial and ecclesiastical responsibility to this Presbytery, and to dissolve them with all other bodies: and that for the future he may rely for his temporal support upon the Presbytery, and the churches and people under its care.

The Rev. Joseph Brown, and Dr. Green, Ruling Elder, were afterwards added to this Committee.

That grace mercy and peace may be with you, and that God may cause his spiritual blessings to abound more and more in you and your wife: so that you may be able to count your present earthly privations and sufferings, which are but for a moment, as light in comparison to the blessedness of the service of Christ Jesus our Lord, and the glory that shall be revealed at his coming, is the prayer of your affectionate brethren.[3]

---

[3]So far as is known, it was the newspaper copy of the Minutes,

Harmony Presbytery sends her missionary Wilson the full text of the original action Coit sponsored; but these two little added phrases, "There is a diversity of opinion..."; "It is contended...", make all the difference in the world.

For John Calkins Coit the voice of Harmony may still be sweet; but oh, how it has been muted.

---

carrying the letter within them as transcribed above, which reached Wilson and to which he replied. The Minutes of Harmony Presbytery at that time were kept in manuscript, so that members had no printed minutes for their own use.

The official text from the MSS is given above, p , Footnote 8, p 349 of Session LXXV of Harmony Presbytery, April, 1844.

JOHN LEIGHTON WILSON DEMURS

We know from a letter to his sister that John Leighton Wilson of the Gaboon River in Western Africa had received at least the opening installment of the long letter of the Committee as published in the pages of the newspaper in the spring and summer of 1843.

> "I was not a little surprised and grieved to see in public print the article against the American Board, but I am glad the communication was disapproved by Harmony Presbytery. The charges and intimations against the Board are unjust and undeserved."[1]

Wilson's carefully worded and generous reply is drawn up largely with reference to the official letter sent by the Committee "in behalf of the Presbytery of Harmony, and published in the Charleston Observer, under date of April 6th, 1844...."[2] It would be difficult to tell from this reply that he had read the much longer and less restrained earlier letter from the Committee. He restricts himself to answering

---

[1] John Leighton Wilson to his sister, from the Gaboon [no date given], as quoted in Hampden C. DuBose, Memoirs of Rev. John Leighton Wilson, D. D., pp 156-157.

[2] Until further notice, this and all further quotations from Wilson's reply are from J. Leighton Wilson to the Rev. Messrs. J. C. Coit, Thomas R. English, and others, from Mission Station, Gaboon River, (West Africa), January 7, 1845, as printed in The Charleston Observer, XIX:26, June 28, 1845, p 2 [= p 102].

the first of the two questions asked in the officially authorized Presbytery letter, and to comments on material in it. He neither refers to nor comments on materials appearing only in the Committee's own earlier letter.

"Dear Brethren," he writes, "Your letter...has just been received, and I avail myself of the first opportunity, and the same medium[,] to convey an answer."

> In relation to your inquiry whether I am willing to dissolve my connection with the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions, and form an exclusive connection with the Presbytery of Harmony, I feel constrained to answer in the negative. I need hardly add, that it is with feelings of unfeigned regret that I am constrained to differ from those for whom I have always cherished sentiments of sincere affection, and to whom I feel attached by ties of more than ordinary tenderness. But, brethren, it seems to me that you entertain erroneous notions in relation to my connection with the A.B.C.F.M., as well as to the Presbytery of Harmony, and I feel bound, therefore, to state some of the reasons which have influenced me to decline your proposal, and will likewise offer some remarks upon the motives which you have urged why I should withdraw from the American Board.

He does this in a series of four separate letters, each of which would be considered amply long, and for whose length Wilson apologises; yet by comparison with the Committee's original marathon epistle it has an appearance of admirable brevity. His message is simple, straightforward, and easily analyzed:

First, he feels constrained to remain in the ABCFM's care because he was ordained by Harmony Presbytery expressly for the special object of going out to Africa under the support of that body; because it would require his leaving the station where he has with great difficultty laid his foundations in language and knowledge of the people; all "to engage in what you yourselves cannot denominate other than an

experiment." He feels that in a few years they themselves would have nothing "but unavailing regrets to offer in view of the inconsiderate measure" he would have adopted by resigning from the ABCFM.

Further, the American Board and its Prudential Committee have given him fine support, including valued "fraternal advice and counsel, ...placing within our reach much matured missionary experience...." By contrast, Wilson is convinced that "Presbyteries are in no way qualified to carry on missionary operations; and I feel assured that all experiments of the kind must be conducted in a languid and inefficient manner, or result in an entire failure."

> It is quite unreasonable[, Wilson added,] that all the members of any one Presbytery can make themselves so intimately acquainted with the affairs of a Missionary, five thousand miles distant, as to give enlightened advice on the various topics which will be constantly presenting themselves for consideration; and to vote or act upon questions of importance, without sufficient knowledge of the merits of the case, is to entail endless trouble and perplexity upon your Missionaries. By dividing responsibility among so many, no one will be likely to bestow that special attention upon the affairs of the Mission which is essential to its efficiency and success. Another difficulty arises from the fact, that Presbyteries do not and cannot convene as often as the exigencies of the Mission may demand. Cases constantly occur that need prompt and immediate action. Should these occur in the interval of the meetings of Presbytery[,] what is to be done? -- who will act? Perhaps it will be replied, that a Committee may be appointed, whose business it shall be to attend to the affairs of the Mission, and report the same to Presbytery at its regular meetings.

If so, we are into a serious problem. "[T]hat Committee, by whatever name it may be called, is virtually a Board of Missions."

The question will then turn upon another point,

that is, whether it is best upon the whole, for every Presbytery in the country to have its own Board of Missions, or all those Presbyteries united, as in the General Assembly, have one Board, or further, whether evangelical churches of different names, may not all unite in the same institution. I pretend to institute no comparisons between these various organizations, or their adaptedness to carry on Missionary operations, further than this general remark, which applies particularly to the first, that whatever difficulties you may obviate at home by the multiplication of Missionary Boards, you only increase those of the Missionaries abroad.

Concert, a good understanding, and kindly feelings among the Missionaries in the same field, is indispensable to their happiness and usefulness; and the absence of these, is the occasion of greater and more serious evils than you can readily conceive. The multiplication of Boards to the extent you propose, would be productive of little else than confusion and disaster.

Continuing his reasons for declining to sever his connection with the ABCFM, Wilson says that he cannot see how so many different missionaries, under so many different Boards, could work well together. And the Presbytery's principles if carried out would put them into their own Boards for Domestic Missions, Tracts, Sunday School and Publishing Departments. "Can it be conceived," he asks, that they would be conducted with one hundredth part of the efficiency that they are [now]?"

And since the official letter reports a diversity of opinion in the Presbytery on the constitutionality of conducting the work of Foreign Missions through the medium of Boards, it would hardly be surprising that he should hold to a successful system of operations, rather than try one "the success and practicality of which seems more than doubtful."

Wilson freely admits that there are incidental evils inseparable from all great undertakings. But he feels that

in this case they have been unduly magnified.

> What will be the end of strife, if every institution is to be torn down, which does not, in every respect, comport with our ideas of what is best and most expedient? Not one will be left standing, because not one bears the impress of perfection. And what will be the fate of pure and undefiled religion in the meantime? History will record, that while the friends of Christ were contending about unimportant points, the enemy came in and carried off the prey.

In his second letter, written January 10th, 1845, Wilson undertakes to examine the reasons given by the Committee in support of its proposals. As to the idea that the ABCFM intercepts the ecclesiastical relationships between the missionary and the presbytery, he has never found it so; and Presbytery has every right to expect reports. "If, heretofore, I have been remiss in making out full and stated reports for the Presbytery of Harmony, the fault is my own, and the acknowledgement is now made with assurances of better things to come." But he thinks that the problem lies in the geography of the case, and would continue even if he were a Missionary from Presbytery.

Wilson has no inclination to question the right of every branch of the Christian Church to have its own Board of Missions. Still, if several branches are able to lay aside their differences and cooperate, as the ABCFM, surely all good men ought to wish it God-speed.

> But[, he concludes,] if Boards of Missions are to become as numerous as the Presbyteries, and Associations, and Conferences, in the country, I can foresee little else than confusion and disappointment, so far as the great work of Missions is concerned, and, I know of

no one good object that will be attained.

I remain, dear brethren, yours in Christian bonds,
J. Leighton Wilson[3]

Writing further on the 10th of January, 1845, John Leighton Wilson takes up the implication in Harmony Presbytery's letter that the chief business of the ABCFM's missionaries is to teach literature and science to the heathen, and print books. He concedes that the opinion is not confined to the members of Harmony Presbytery and that the understanding seems to be abroad that missionaries are beginning to rely too much on schools and books, to the neglect of the great work of preaching the Gospel.

Wilson answers this apprehension in two ways. First, the missionaries, and he himself, spend the major portion of their time in preaching the gospel; for himself, more than in all his other activities combined. Second, missionaries in heathen countries find no schools except those established by missionaries, and none who can read save those taught in those schools.

> On his arrival in such a country, the Missionary does not feel that books and schools are necessary to the conversion of souls, but he will very soon have reason to see, that they will be necessary to give stability and perpetuity to his work. He reasons very naturally in this way: "It is not more certain that the tendency of things in my native country would be downward and backward, if schools and religious books were to fall into desuetude, than it is that this country, in which I have cast my lot, must forever remain in a barbarous condition, without their introduction." He

---

[3] J[ohn] Leighton Wilson to the Rev. Messrs. J. C. Coit, Thomas R. English, and others, from Mission Station, Gaboon River, (West Africa,) January 10, 1845. No. II in series. The Charleston Observer, XIX:27, July 5, 1845, p 2 [= p 106].

> reasons further: "that if my brethren whom I have left behind, justly regard schools, and bibles, and religious tracts, as important auxiliaries in promoting the cause of genuine piety among the people around them, those things must still be more important to me in a land where all is moral darkness[.] -- If my brethren at home can devote a portion of their time, without infringing upon their ministerial duties, in promoting these collateral works of mercy, why may not I imitate their example, and make strong the foundation of that church, which I would rear here to the honor of my Saviour?"[4]

To Wilson's thinking, whatever arguments there may be for an educated body of believers, and an educated ministry, in our own country, must apply with ten-fold force to a country where these things are unknown.

> How a sentiment unfavorable to schools and books, in connection with missionary operations, could have originated and found supporters in a Protestant community, I really feel at a loss to conceive.
>
> Those who array themselves in opposition to these things, not only adopt the policy, as it seems to me, but so far as the cause of truth and enlightened piety are concerned, throw themselves back into the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church. -- It has been their uniform policy to keep books and schools entirely out of sight, except where their special object has been to eradicate or supplant Protestantism.

That this should be particularly so in regard to Bible printing, distribution, and reading, should be more than obvious. "[T]he same great authority which has said go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature, has likewise said, 'search the scriptures;' which the hea-

---

[4]J[ohn] Leighton Wilson to the Rev. Messrs. J. C. Coit, Thomas R. English, and others, from Mission Station, Gaboon River, (West Africa,) January 10, 1845. No. III in series. The Charleston Observer, XIX:28, July 12, 1845, p 1 [= p 109]. Until further notice, quotations from Wilson are from this letter. Additional paragraphing supplied.

then cannot do until he is taught to read, and is furnished with the scriptures in his own tongue."

> In the mean time, I remain, dear brethren, yours in Christian bonds,
>
> J. Leighton Wilson

Concluding his series of four letters a few days later, Wilson continued his able defense of schools and printing presses "as important and necessary appendages of modern missions."

Foremost was the consideration that to win the populations of the tropics, Africans and not foreigners must be the great converters of the people. Climate and the sheer size of the task made this clear. "Our reliance must be placed in a native agency. No other scheme affords any rational hope of ultimate success."

> Every scheme of missions ought to be arranged with reference to this object, and we ought to try to bring about that state of things, as speedily as possible, when the work of evangelization may be safely left in the hands of the people -- in other words, we ought to qualify men, who will be able to take our places, and not only watch over the churches which may be planted along the sea coast, but be the means likewise of carrying the gospel to every part of the country.[5]

But how should they be qualified? The very best preparation possible should be theirs. While in many ways education for the African Christian worker could be simpler than the

---

[5] J[ohn] Leighton Wilson to the Rev. Messrs. J. C. Coit, Thomas R. English, and others, from Mission Station, Gaboon River, (West Africa,) January 14, 1845. No. IV in series. The Charleston Observer, XIX:29, July 19, 1845, p 2 [= p 114]. The rest of the quotations from Wilson are from this letter. Additional paragraphing supplied.

collegiate mysteries necessary in the United States, it is a common mistake to suppose that heathen lands are simple places.

> The opinion is common, that men of very moderate intellectual attainments, may become useful and efficient Missionaries.
>
> It is thought, because they preach to uncultivated people, and because they have none of the subtle forms of infidelity to deal with, that their work is a straightforward, and comparatively easy one. This opinion, whether it be referred to Foreign Missionaries or to a native Ministry, is exceedingly erroneous. Perhaps there is no set of men in the world who are more generally or more deeply impressed with the importance and value of high intellectual qualifications, than Foreign Missionaries. Every scientific study to which their attention has been called, in the common course of education, is, in some way or other, brought into requisition in the Missionary field, and events and emergencies are constantly springing up, which they do not feel themselves qualified to meet. In all cases, they would recommend to the candidate for the Missionary work to extend the term of his study and enlarge the circle of his scientific pursuits.
>
> The work of the Missionary is not simply to go from house to house, and from village to village, to teach the A, B, C, of Christianity to the Heathen. He must study their character, habits, pursuits, intellectual constitution, supersititions, &c. He must find out, and that generally, by the most difficult process, the motives by which they are most easily influenced.
>
> In some respects, he will discover the heathen to be simple hearted and unsophisticated, but in other respects, he will find their character to be an unfathomable abyss. Their language[,] unwritten and barbarous, presents something like an inextricable maze, and nothing but the most patient persevering application can ever master.
>
> To acquire this thorough knowledge of the character of the people, and the modes by which they are most easily influenced, to acquire so complete a mastery of the language as to speak it with ease and to speak directly to the conscience of men, requires powers of mind, superior to the common order; and who ever goes

> forth to the heathen, from the conviction, that he has not talents to make himself influential at home, (provided he does not underrate his own abilities) is likely to be little else than an incumbrance abroad.
>
> I do not suppose it practicable or desirable to attempt to impart the same amount or kind of instruction to native pupils, as candidates for the ministry receive at home. But they ought to have a plain substantial education, and especially ought they to be well indoctrinated into the fundamental principles of christianity.

Having been led aside into consideration of the sophisticated demands made on the missionary to an alien culture, Wilson returns to the main thread of his thought. His staunchly anti-Catholic fellow presbyters need to know that Rome is in Africa, indeed close by on the Gaboon, with schools and printing presses, Antichrist driven to methods she shuns when alone in the field. "[W]hat a strange revolution in the affairs of the world, when Protestants will discard schools and books, and they be taken by Roman Catholics!"

> In conclusion, I would say, dear brethren, I care not how much you may exhort me to preach the Gospel. This duty cannot be unduly magnified. I only ask that other duties, subordinate to be sure, may not be undervalued. If missionary operations are to be divested of the important aid of books and schools; if the churches have not the means or the inclination to provide for them, it will be a calamity which no one can calculate. Before this work of retrenchment commences abroad, every christian ought to ask himself seriously what would be the fate of his own country if these means of piety and morality were entirely suppressed.
>
> I remain, dear brethren, in bonds of unfeigned christian affection,
>
> J. Leighton Wilson

For Wilson the matter was settled. In time he volunteered to depend on the Presbytery of Harmony for all of his

support, provided that his connection with the American Board of Commissioners should remain undisturbed, but this is beyond the limits of our present inquiry. On the eventual failure of his health he returned to the United States. While chancing during recuperation to visit the sessions of the General Assembly, he was to his surprise invited to serve as one of the two associate secretaries with the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

Coming south from New York in 1861 to join his homeland in her secession from the Union, he entered on an honored third career as the first Secretary for Foreign Missions of the southern Assembly, and then, in the darkest years of the war's aftermath, as Secretary simultaneously for Domestic Missions, a work which during that period was reduced almost entirely to sustentation of congregations left in dire straits by the war and the following political and agrarian revolution at the South.

Coit's revolution seemed to Wilson sheer moonshine. Wilson's faithfulness to a Board, and the American Board at that, seemed to Coit to be blindness. We turn now to an analysis and comparison of their positions as set forth in their one-salvo correspondence conducted in the public press for all to see and ponder.

COIT OR WILSON : THE NATURE OF THE CHOICE

To take their exchange of views at face value, John Calkins Coit and John Leighton Wilson were engaged in cross questions and crooked answers. If by chance we did not know from an outside source that Wilson had read the Committee's letter and not merely the brief two pages authorized and approved by Harmony Presbytery, it would be impossible to demonstrate from internal evidence, with any assurance at all, that he had seen it.

At the same time, the Presbytery's official version of its communication to Wilson is ambiguous. It calls for Wilson to drop his Board connection and be related only to Presbytery. There is no language in the brief letter to state that Presbytery intended to undertake the functions of a Board; at the same time, there is no language to suggest the revolutionary policy of missionary self-determination which was the cornerstone of Coit's positive program and which clearly intended to have no Presbytery Board.

Why did Wilson ignore the program of missionary independence and reply as if a little Board were to be Presbytery's mechanism if he accepted the offer? Did he have correspondence from other sources indicating that Coit's ideas would never gain support outside the Committee he

chaired? Did he view Coit's program as so impractical as to be beyond rational comment?

Or did Wilson, established and experienced, feel that the ABCFM was so satisfactory an operation, in which he felt so at home that he was determined not to change, that he therefore chose to attack Presbytery's offer on the assumption that it must involve a Presbyterial mission board -- an easy target to demolish, whereas to take Coit's alternative seriously would require a radical reassessment of his inner being as well as his external relationships? -- a reassessment Wilson did not care to contemplate?

Speculation as to Wilson's inner reactions and motives must on present evidence remain speculation. He was in any case a devoted, honest and self-sacrificing servant of his Lord and of his church. As the years went by and it became physically impossible for him to stay alive in Africa, he settled naturally and effectively into the executive level of his denominations' official foreign mission operations. That he did not seek this administrative office is clear; that he accepted it, after some hesitation, and did well at it, tells us something about his temperament.

Let us return to a tentative conclusion about Wilson after considering the other side of this debate. That Wilson met Coit on two levels effectively is plain; he maintained a clear, open, winsome spirituality as he argued the primacy of preaching and evangelism and the freedom of the Presbyterian under the banner of the American Board, and at the same time he came on powerfully as he demolished from a pragmatic standpoint what to all who are addicted to the literary forms of civilization must inevitably seem to be the weakest areas of Coit's vision -- Coit's mistrust of schools and printing as competitors for the evangelist's time and energy and

attention.

Coit, of course, was a man so far behind his times as to be in advance of them. He would preach the Gospel and trust or train griots of another civilization to remember it; he would leave to cultural imperialists, or to the slow choice of the people, the to him irrelevant introduction of an incidental like printing, no matter how basic to his own culture and civilization it might be. Coupled with Wilson's devastating pragmatic attack on what plainly was not Coit's position, and which was nowhere stated as Presbytery's position (the creation and multiplication of Foreign Mission Board functions among a multitude of people ill qualified to do what Coit on a priori grounds believed they had no business doing), Coit's rejection of schools and printing certainly gave Wilson a large advantage in the debate.

We can judge from the failure of Harmony Presbytery to move against Wilson, or to find new missionaries who might be willing to start out from the beginning on a course an older man could be expected to have difficulty changing over to, that Wilson in the immediate and practical sense won his case.

Consider further, now, John Calkins Coit. Reading between the lines of the Presbytery's minutes, and reading the lines themselves, we find Coit involved in two other intense Presbytery debates simultaneously with his campaign for reform in mission administration. The first was a question of the elder; was he necessary for a quorum of Presbytery? The second was also a question of the elder: should he or should he not join the ministers in laying on hands of ordination? Coit lost on both of these in Harmony Presbytery; called for reconsideration at the next meeting; got it; and after strenuous debate and recorded roll-call votes

succeeded in reversing one and failed to reverse the other.

This meant that in addition to the weight of argument on mission policy which he had to carry, and in addition to the weight of inertia he would have to overcome, and in addition to the problem he faced in getting a truly revolutionary policy understood and adopted, Coit was also faced with what every practical political presbyter knows without being told: the men he pushed to the wall on the two elder questions, and forced one reversal from over their bitterest opposition, but failed to defeat across the board, could in many instances be counted on to vote against him on the mission question purely out of reflex, purely out of opposition to Coit.

For some, if Coit was for it, that was all they wanted to know to be against it.

What should we make of Coit's proposals?

The following analysis is suggested as worth serious consideration.

1. John Calkins Coit clearly perceived both forms of the dilemma which large benevolent works posed the American churches in the 19th Century.

2. John Calkins Coit was completely and internally convinced that Thornwell's main positions, advanced on the floor of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia and in the two Baltimore articles, were right. On the incompatibility of external Boards with the Presbyterian system he was in agreement with Thornwell. On the even greater incompatibility of internal Boards with the Presbyterian system he was equally agreed. On the subject of Agents he was agreed. On the solution for the Agent problem he was agreed: appoint Deacons.

3. On the surface, John Calkins Coit was agreed with James Henley Thornwell that the Presbytery, as the leading and central Presbyterian structure, should emerge as the proper center of missionary endeavor in the Presbyterian Church. He was agreed with Thornwell that missionary enterprise was a spiritual enterprise; and that it should be handled by the spiritual courts, the bodies which alone in the Presbyterian Church were qualified and authorized by the Presbyterian system to bear rule and determine ecclesiastical and spiritual questions.

4. In fact, however, John Calkins Coit went far beyond anything James Henley Thornwell had put down in writing. Thornwell's statements, as we have seen, were incisive and trenchant, but there had been nothing in them to show conclusively that the Presbyteries were not to <u>manage</u> the missionary enterprise. Deacons as replacements for the Board members are a far cry from Coit's clear-cut abolition of all serving tables from the floor of Presbytery -- or from Presbytery's basement or attic, for that matter. Coit announced an entirely radical program. The foreign missionary was to do his work on the same fundamental understanding which governed the pastor: to Presbytery and to God he was responsible for his spiritual integrity and the integrity of his message. To Presbytery and to God he was responsible for keeping the organized, structured church, the heirs of the apostles, out of the business of serving any kind of tables and in the business of laboring in the Word. In the things of this world, the missionary like the pastor would trust God -- and keep his mind and energy concentrated on his spiritual responsibilities.

As Coit develops it, this is no abdication. It is no easy way out. The layer by layer, impact by impact, text by text, illustration by illustration, blow by blow weight of

his argument lays on the missionary and home pastor alike a fearsome responsibility, fully worthy of the severest Puritan responsibilities hammered out by Coit's ancestors who looked God and the Bible in the face and did their able, earnest best to be workmen who did not need to be ashamed.

Having done this, Coit trusts the missionary. He exhorts the missionary to the highest pitch of spiritual responsibility, and reminds him that Presbytery's responsibility is to try to see in love that he lives up to it. Then Coit in perfect trust turns over to the missionary entire responsibility in all the mechanics of living. The Presbytery is no fit body to administer temporalities; the men on the field, as they gain experience and learn cooperation with each other, will know far more about any such questions than any Presbytery or any Board.

But this is only the outer courtyard of Coit's trust. The heart of his revolutionary proposal, which is the most thoroughly integrated and radical proposal in the area of mission administration to find serious expression in the Presbyterian church in modern times, comes at the point at which he says, in answer to the question, What plan or scheme have the Presbytery to propose?

> We answer, none whatever; we have exhorted you not to hear the Board; we now charge you not to hearken to the Presbytery, but we beseech you in Christ's stead to hear the 'Son of God, hear ye him,' Matt. 17:5.

To understand Coit's rationale, we must think back to his first given: the Lord Jesus Christ, getting ready to return to his Father in Heaven for a season, facing the original mission problem. A broad, hostile and complex world waited. Humanly speaking he had limited resources to send into the world. The men he had trained were inexperienced

and few. They would have variables beyond number to contend with. Presumably one of two things was true: either as the Son of Man he had thought about it and come to the best conclusion he could; or else as the Son of God he knew inerringly what to do. In either case, what he did was to give his disciples the content of his teaching, the example of his own life and death, the power of his resurrection, the promise of his return in his ascension, the guidance of the Apostles, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

What did the Apostles do with all this? They devoted themselves to a spiritual ministry, and ordained particular kinds of officers in the churches which grew up under their ministry. These officers in turn, learning from the Apostles, devoted themselves to a spiritual ministry and continued the simple uncomplicated system based on preaching, pointing to God, gathering in those who believed, and setting these simple classes of officers aside to continue the ministry -- the deacons relieving the spiritual officers of the time-comsuming care of temporal necessities.

This was for Coit, as it was for Thornwell, the pattern of the Presbyterian Church; and that was why they consistantly maintained that the Presbyterian Church was organized on the Apostolic pattern. To put things as simply as possible, this ancient pattern of spiritual officers with spiritual responsibilities, aided by deacons who took care of serving tables for the needy -- benevolence, doing good -- was good enough for the Apostle Paul and it was good enough for John Calkins Coit. It is the key to his program. Go back to basics: as the Holy Spirit raises up holy men, godly men who are called to this ministry, ordain them. Fill them full of the word of God and send them out in the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. If they trust in God, and are truly called by him; if you have instructed and exhorted the

people and they have truly delivered themselves into the hands of the Holy Spirit; then the wherewithal will be supplied amply, in good time, unfailing, in the measure needed in God's own plan.

Relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, missionaries like these need no bureaucratic, pompous, absentee, miscalled men at home to order their affairs for them.

Gildersleeve at the editor's desk, Ketchum in the Presbytery, Wilson leaning on Boston, safe and secure from all alarms, all these can easily tell Coit his program is impractical, that missions require Boards, that Presbyterial missions assume Boards. Coit is unimpressed. His plan seems radical and revolutionary only because Pope and Protestant alike have so far forgotten their roots that they imagine that Jesus and the Apostles, facing a world as hostile, confused and demanding as ours ever will be, simply had no idea of what they were doing.

Coit's critics accuse him of novelty, of innovation, and impracticality. Coit stands firm. Radical, in its contrast with the Board system, yes. Novel, in never having been seen in the lifetime of 19th-Century men, yes. Impractical, in being unattractive to so many that few will be found to try it, yes. But for Coit his program is anything but radical; it is old shoe, as plain as the books of Luke and Acts. His program is as novel as the New Testament, and no newer.

And John Calkins Coit has one unanswerable reply to the pragmatic attack on his program as impractical. His reply is one simple question: what ever proved more practical than this plan proved to be during all the centuries in which it was applied?

To sum up, then, this three-year section of the ongoing

debate of 1839-1861 on the administration of missions in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, we find

--- that John Calkins Coit, in contrast to Wilson and Gildersleeve, identified the new dilemma of the churches, and proposed a radical solution to it.

--- that John Calkins Coit won his first skirmishes in Presbytery, but eventually lost the foreign mission wing of his war.

--- that on some externals, many of them important, Coit proved right. No answer was made to him, and no answer ever has been made, to his charge that Presbytery abdicates its care, supervision and control of its missionaries, or to his charge that the Board, a structure entirely alien to the concept of Presbyterian church government by ministers and elders in an ascending series of parliamentary courts, exercises not simply Presbyterial but indeed essentially Prelatical control over its missionaries. No answer was made to him, and no answer ever has been made, to his charge that Boards put their own reputations in high priority. To these and similar difficulties with Boards, the most that can be said is what John Leighton Wilson said: that their good can be said to outweigh their bad.

--- that on some externals, many of them important, Coit has always been adjudged wrong. Few there are who would dissent from Wilson's astonishment that in Presbyterian circles grown men could be found who saw <u>no</u> spiritual or evangelistic need for books and schools. Few familiar with the record, as Gildersleeve was familiar with the record, would judge Coit right in his claims that no court but Presbytery had any constitutional authorization to conduct missions. And peripheral but crucial to his failure to win a larger support for his program, was his choice of the means of persuasion. By making a comprehensive Scriptural argument

fundamental to his approach, and choosing the transient and inflexible columns of a newspaper instead of the permanent and typographically more supple medium of pamphlet or book for the vehicle of his argument, he perhaps unintentionally made sure first, that only the most determined could or would follow the train of his argument and appreciate it; and second, that his whole argument would sink out of sight with the transitory pages of the weekly newspaper which carried it.

--- that at the heart of all Coit's rhetoric lay a simple, direct, scriptural challenge: to take the Bible seriously, to fill the hearts of preachers and people alike with the Word of God, and send the preachers out in confidence that they will <u>hear God</u> in all they undertake, and be blessed by him, while the people <u>hear God</u> and supply everything necessary for the preaching of the Word.

--- that Wilson, practical missionary destined to become a wise, practical missionary statesman, either missed this challenge or chose to ignore it.

--- that the Presbyterian church to this day has followed Wilson in his decision.

--- that whether Wilson, and the Presbyterian church, have thus shown themselves practical, but at a price beyond calculation, lies not in scholarship or old habit to perceive, but in a vaster, deeper realm.

MEANWHILE, THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

While the Committee of Harmony Presbytery worked out its correspondence with John Leighton Wilson, the larger theater of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was chiefly occupied with other things. Each year the General Assembly devoted a major part of its time to hearing the reports of her Boards, in formulating recommendations about them in Committee, and in adopting the recommendations. These regularly commended the work of the Boards to the Synods, to be recommended and commended in turn to the Presbyteries and their constitutent churches.

The history of the Boards in this period is largely one of relatively slow, relatively steady growth, under unspectacular management. It is not quite correct to say that if a man has read one annual report from a Board, he has read them all; but for the most part, there is a certain evenness and predictability about them that has prevented their ever making the best-seller lists.

The state of the General Assembly and of some aspects of her work at about this time which concern us may be briefly indicated by the following notices:

In the General Assembly of 1840 the Presbytery of Miami

sent up a Memorial, "praying the Assembly to take some action in relation to the office of deacon." The Princeton Reviewer in reporting this incident remarks that "the office of deacon ...has sunk extensively into disuse in the Presbyterian Church." The floor apparently sprang to life.[1] We may infer that to many, Thornwell's proposal to emphasize deacons in Presbyterian benevolence would strike a sizeable portion of the constituency as assuming the revival of a moribund office.

At the same Assembly, the secular or commercial aspect of Board responsibilities is brought out in connection with the Report of the Board of Publication. As the Princeton Reviewer puts it,

> The other matter, the circulation of the books when printed, is more an affair of business, in which the board have the advantage of the example and experience of the Methodist book concern, the volume department of the American Tract Society, and of other similar institutions.
>
> The experience of these societies has, we think, clearly established one point, and that is, that it will never do simply to publish books, and store them in Philadelphia and a few other places, and wait till they are called for. Some method must be devised for bringing them before the people, to their houses.
>
> It is in this way that the hundreds of thousands of volumes of the Tract Society have been circulated through the south and west, which, without such efforts, would be cumbering the shelves of the ware-houses in New York.[2]

The primitive state of benevolent giving at this time is confirmed as we read the Princeton Reviewer's summary of the

---

[1] "The General Assembly of 1840," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XII:3, July 1840, p 419.

[2] The same, p 429. Additional paragraphing supplied.

General Assembly of 1842:

> On a subsequent day on motion of the Rev. E. B. Smith, the following minute was adopted:
>
> The General Assembly impressed with the importance of making more decided and prompt efforts to secure from all the members of its communion, systematic contributions to the funds of the Board of Foreign Missions, HEREBY ENJOINS on all the Presbyteries which have not already anticipated such action,
>
> 1st. To require of every pastor and minister supplying a church, and of the Sessions of all vacant churches, the adoption of some plan by which, if possible, all the members of their respective congregations shall hear the claims of this great Christian charity, and annually enjoy an opportunity of contributing to its sustenance, to the extent of their ability, however limited; and
>
> 2d. To embody in their annual presbyterial report to the General Assembly, an account of the diligence of the Presbytery and the success of its efforts in this matter.[3]

The reviewer remarks that in the discussion on the floor of the Assembly, the members expressed the "greatest interest in the successful operation of this Board."[4]

In what the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review indicates is an annual occurence in connection with discussion of the reports of the Boards, the subject of the [fund-raising] Agencies was raised. "This is such an easy topic of declamation," says the Princeton Reviewer, "and is in itself so generally unpopular that it is not a matter of surprise that even the small number of agents in the service of this and our other Boards should be a matter of com-

---

[3]"The General Assembly of 1842," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XIV:3, July 1842, p 487.

[4]The same.

plaint."[5] We sense that Princeton does not share the views of Breckinridge, Smith, Thornwell, and John Calkins Coit in respect to Agencies. It can be understood, Princeton continues, that since we

> have in our Presbyteries, our ministers, elders and deacons, an organization and men, [they] would seem to preclude the necessity of the expensive machinery of agents.[6]

The Princeton Reviewer would deprecate the premature adoption of such a view.

> But those who know much of human nature, even when partially sanctified, or who open their minds to the lessons of experience, know that men need to be roused and urged to discharge even acknowledged duties.
>
> There is no Christian in the land who does not admit the duty of contributing to the Bible, Tract, Missionary, and other religious and benevolent enterprises of the day; but have these enterprises ever been started or carried on, without this duty being pressed both upon ministers and people, and the opportunity for the present discharge of it, being presented to them? Besides, we are all creatures more or less of habit.
>
> Men who have grown up, and become old without forming the habit of giving, or of urging others to give, are not easily brought by their own persuasions to undertake the duty.
>
> We know a congregation which now gives a larger salary to its pastor than it ever gave before, and gives to benevolent objects more than it formerly gave to its minister; simply because its present pastor has been formed under the influences of the present instead of the past century.
>
> We say this in no disparagement of our elder ministers. They may be in many respects much better men

---

[5]The same, pp 487-488. Paragraphing supplied.

[6]The same, p 489.

> than their children; but as to the single point of missionary and other cognate enterprises, they cannot in general be expected to take the interest in them, or to devote the time to them, which may be fairly demanded of men who have heard of little else since the day of their spiritual birth.
>
> Agencies, therefore, are a necessary evil in the beginning of every benevolent work. One of their best effects is to render themselves unnecessary. They awaken a spirit and induce habits which enables the church [eventually to dispense with them.][7]

"While speaking of this subject of agencies," Princeton continues, "we will drop an idea, which perhaps has been before suggested in these pages, and that is, that

> it seems to us important, that our agents should have it for their object not so much to collect money, as to rouse the churches and organize the means of collecting it.
>
> If our church sessions would take this matter in hand, and appoint a collector to present to every member of the congregation, once a year, the opportunity of contributing to each of our Boards, there would be no need of agents; and the best way in which an agent could labour, would be to get the sessions engaged in this very work.[8]

Here is an early glimmer (in Princeton's thought) of modern systematic benevolence, if modern and systematic are not too advanced words to mention in the same breath with a suggestion that it might be possible for Sessions to appoint one person to make an every-member canvass on behalf of Foreign Missions so that <u>once a year</u> a single special offering for Foreign Missions might be taken up.

Next year the problem has come up in the 1843 General

---

[7]The same, p 489.

[8]The same, page 489.

Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, as to the precise nature of the ruling eldership. Should the ruling elders join in laying on the hands of Presbytery at ordinations? Here for the first time we meet the Reverend W. L. Breckinridge, brother of John and of Robert J. Breckinridge. He is another strong-minded member of the ubiquitous Kentucky family.

As reported in The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, we find him echoing in this context some of the ideas and phrases Thornwell used in replying to Thomas Smyth in W. L. Breckinridge's brother's Spirit of the XIX. Century about a year before. It seems that on the Presbyterian constitution he prefers to be a strict constructionist.

> Surely no one will think usage a safe interpreter, or capable of deciding the matter in debate[, Princeton reports W. L. Breckinridge as saying.] Usage sanctioned the plan of union; but was this considered a good argument for continuing it? It was discussed until the plan of union and the usage of thirty years were alike declared unconstitutional....
>
> Let us admit that the alleged novelty of the practice in question is true; yet this is no argument to prove that the general usage, however old, is right.
>
> If novelty be a ground of valid objection, then the Reformation itself must be wrong....

But W. L. Breckinridge is not to be counted as one who sets high value on the Presbyterian form of church government.

> There were some opinions connected with the subject, which, previous to coming to the main point, he wished to disclaim.
>
> He did not, for instance, believe in the jus divinum of Presbyterianism, or of any other form of church government.

> He was not prepared to unchurch all who did not agree with him in respect to the best form of the church.
>
> He believed that God has settled the great principles of ecclesiastical government; but not that he has defined any particular form.[9]

We may suspect, from this brief glimpse of W. L. Breckinridge in action, that he will not be found on his brother's side in the Board question; if Presbyterian government church government sits as light with him as this, then in this Breckinridge's view were Boards to be conclusively contrary to that government, they would still be far from being necessarily contrary to anything God has settled.

In the mid-1840s, as we know, the Presbytery of Harmony is settling her foreign missionary question, and (in developments we have not traced, but of which we will find the results recorded with gratitude in later years) under the enthusiasms of John Calkins Coit is beginning to make changes in her home mission operations. No trace of these Harmony matters appear to have disturbed the loftier machinery of the General Assembly.[10]

Throughout these years, the steady literary output of the Princeton group was having its desired effect of making Princeton a natural center of light for a wide circle of

---

[9] "The General Assembly of 1843," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XV:3, July 1843, p 434.

[10] The Minutes and the commentaries do reflect the growing tensions on slavery, and the determination in the Old School, as in the New School, not to split the church over them. In the Old School the determination issues in the form of reiterations of earlier pronouncements which satified the demands of morality by putting slavery in a condemned light, but which like the basic pronouncement of 1818 carefully refrain from bringing

adherents throughout the Presbyterian church. In this period as generally, Charles Hodge was the focus of a far-

---

the sanctions of discipline to bear on Presbyterian slaveholders. Alas for the New School, the determination in that body also takes at first this same form; then under renewed Abolitionist pressure begins to devise new pronouncements designed to continue to have it both ways, always retaining the twin provisions: condemnation of slavery, but excuse and refuge for the slaveholder, fresh gymnastics of which we are reminded by Frederick Augustus Ross, New School author of Slavery Ordained of God.

In lectures delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary, the late John W. Cristie of Wilmington, Delaware, documented the thesis that the slaveholding commissioners from the South entered into a bargain with the antislavery commissioners from the North, agreeing to the passage of the 1818 anti-slavery resolutions by the Assembly in exchange for the unfrocking of George Bourne who had systematically denounced his elders and ministerial colleagues in the Valley of Virginia for both slaveholding and cruelty to their slaves.

According to notes made at the time by the writer, Dr. Christie's conclusions on the subject were

1. The Southern commissioners absented themselves from the floor at the time of the adoption, thus allowing it to be passed unanimously; and

2. They considered it a bargain to have Bourne's hide nailed to the wall in exchange for a theoretical statement with no teeth and no possible enforcement. The anti-slavery men got their words; the slaveholders got Bourne's head delivered in a sack. The unanimous adoption of the anti-slavery language in the Presbyterian anti-slavery pronouncement of 1818 was a reflection of advanced Southern ecclesiastical politics, not of advanced Southern ecclesiastical morality.

During this period the difference between Old and New School pronouncements on slavery is only that the Old School sticks by its earlier equivocations, while

flung correspondence.[11] By 1846 probably no better known man than he could have been proposed for moderator.

It is significant that in the course of honoring her most distinguished sons, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America which in 1846 elected Charles Hodge of Princeton to be Moderator of her General Assembly, turned in 1847, the next year, to James Henley Thornwell. Hodge's election was the expectable glory. No man in the church, not yet Moderator, had for so long occupied a pivotal position with such steadiness; Charles Hodge was increasingly the indispensable dependable wheelhorse of the central ideas and positions of the Presbyterian Church in the United State of America.

Thornwell's election was of another dimension. At this time Thornwell was pastor of no great metropolitan pulpit; was Secretary of no Board; was professor at no Theological Seminary, let alone at the leading Seminary of the church, Princeton.

What was he? He was professor at a small college in a state remote from both the membership center and the opera-

---

the New School moves toward devising fresh ones.

For typical discussions, see "The General Assembly of 1845," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XVII:3, July 1845, p 439; "The General Assembly of 1846," BRPR, XVIII:3, July 1846, pp 421-422.

[11] Typical of the distances involved, and of the way men regularly sought to enlist Hodge's support in any project they thought important, is the letter of William Graham of Midway, Woodford County, Kentucky, to Charles Hodge in Princeton, written April 5, 1846. In the Hodge Letters and Papers, The Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey.

tional center of the Presbyterian Church. And he was young -- the youngest moderator ever chosen by the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, before or since. The election marks the official recognition by his denomination of Thornwell as one of the ablest and most striking of her ministers.

Some men are marked as able from early years; most of these are given the highest honors only when they have shown by maturity, character and accomplishment that beyond ability they have those long-run powers and qualities which alone can stand the test of time. By the time he was 34 James Henley Thornwell had done so, and was clearly among those Presbyterians who should be permanently honored and remembered. The General Assembly has at no other time believed she knew in one so young the marks worthy of a permanent respect. In the 34-year-old South Carolinian, she believed she saw them already matured, and she installed him in her Moderator's chair.

Next year, in 1848, Thornwell would be back as Retiring Moderator. Benjamin Mosby Smith, the Village Pastor whose hints on the Agency System we have seen, would attend as a fellow commissioner. Thornwell, present as a commissioner in 1837, 1840, and 1846, with a wisdom beyond his youth and a knowledge of his own youthful tendency to be carried away with the enthusiams of battle, has deliberately held himself back from wide involvement in the debates at the Assembly. Now, officially recognized as a senior counselor of the Presbyterian church, he will be able to apply his strength more directly to the subjects and issues he is interested in.

Though the 1847 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America is remembered by us chiefly for its choice of Moderator, we should not write it

off as otherwise empty of interest. Much occurred there, including much speaking, which was of concern to those present; yet the most memorable dictum resulting came not from the floor but from the sage analysts at Princeton. The growth of the Old School Wing of the Church had been steady and considerable, in contrast to the stunted growth of the New School Assembly. Proposals were made to reduce representation, in order to maintain a smaller number of commissioners and cut down on the amount of speaking. Princeton's comment is unarguable:

> These are doubtless real evils; but it is urged in reply, that the proposed measure would have no tendency to obviate or abate them.
>
> All the experience of deliberative bodies goes to show that no reduction in the number of members would have the effect of diminishing the amount of speaking, unless it were carried to a point that would entirely defeat the whole principle of representation in the Assembly.
>
> Upon every question about which there is a diversity of views at all, there will be found in every such body, however small it might be made, persons representing every shade of opinion, and therefore anxious to express their opinions.[12]

In the General Assembly of 1848 a confluence of circumstances placed the operations of the Boards before the commissioners in several lights.

Agents were a primary target of criticism. Before the Assembly convened there had been charges of dishonesty. Malversation and peculation, if not rife, were rumored to have arisen, and not at one Board alone.

---

[12] "The General Assembly of 1847," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XIX:3, July 1847, p 398. Additional paragraphing supplied. Italics added.

As Judge Hepburn put it, expense accounts are the downfall of honesty; "his principal objection to the Boards was the allowance of traveling expenses to their agents."[13]

On the floor the charges were denounced as baseless. "As to the...charge, of falsifying the accounts about travelling expenses,

> the General Agent had no more to do with it than the man in the moon.
>
> It was a mere mistake of the clerk of the office, who was suddenly called upon to make out the statements and who had to search into the pecuniary matters of two agents, whose accounts were mixed up together, they having co-operated in the same field.
>
> When the error was pointed out, the unintentional injustice to one of these respected brethren was immediately corrected, and explained to his entire satisfaction.
>
> And yet these two charges are here publicly thrown out against the General Agent, one of them involving deep moral turpitude, when both of them could have been explained, if the chairman had requested an explanation from any one connected with the Board.
>
> Sir, did you ever hear of an investigating committee in Congress, or elsewhere, proposing the most serious charges and changes, without ever having called before them the heads, or clerks, in the offices? This mode of proceeding was not only unjust to the Board; it was unjust to the church,[14] to the General Assembly, and to all parties concerned.

The Secretary went on to say that the Board must have agents. "If the Presbyterian Church should adopt the Scotch plan, and assign particular Sabbaths for the different benev-

---

[13] "The General Assembly of 1848," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XX:3, July 1848, p 430.

[14] The same, p 435. Paragraphing supplied.

olent objects, and enjoin upon the inferior judicatories to carry on their operations in this systematic way, perhaps after time we might dispense with agents.

> But this committee propose to abolish our agencies, and yet they give us no substitute.[15]

The investigation of the alleged irregularities was evidently not conducted in such a way as to impress the Boards with the responsibility or impartiality of the investi-- gators. "The Boards," said one of their defenders, "submit cheerfully to the supervision of the General Assembly, and will of course comply with all their orders; but they hope the Assembly will protect them from unreasonable agitation, and unfounded and injurious imputations."[16]

> Let us have investigation according to the usual of law and equity, and every facility will be offered by the Boards to any committee they may appoint.[17]

Every responsible Board executive knows that there are always critics to be found who can see little but waste as they scan any account presented of a Board's expenditures. The most experienced Secretaries speak to the Assembly, however, only at the urging of others, and will expend a good deal of energy in finding others to do the urging rather than push themselves forward to the floor. At this Assembly we are able to fill in an important gap in our earlier record. Walter Lowrie, whose remarks at the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia in 1840 have been lost, was well reported at the General Assembly of 1848. Here is the prototype of all Presbyterian Board executives, at the peak of his form, defending his staff from false accusations.

---

[15] The same, p 436.
[16] The same, p 438.
[17] The same.

Walter Lowrie, Esq., Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions, said it was only at the earnest request of several brethren, that he said anything on this report. He was always in favour that the fullest examination should be made in this Assembly, and had once again suggested that a committee consisting of one elder from each Synod should be appointed at each session of the Assembly to examine these matters.

There are two questions involved in this report.

1st. Can the Assembly manage these details?

2nd. Are the charges and complaints well founded?

The report objects to the travelling expenses of officers and agents.

The report objects to their present salaries.

The reports objects to the entire system of agents.

If the travelling expenses of the officers and agents were every year alike, then they might be discontinued, and a fixed salary allowed for both. But these expenses are different in different years. The agents go where they are sent by the Boards, and if they travel 5000 miles, they incur more expense than if they travel but 1000. In my own case my traveling expenses have varied very much. One year $40, another $75.

One year I spent seven months in the south, and the expense was $500, which however, I paid myself. Last year I was three months visiting Indians, the expense was $165. This was paid from another source. These variations show that a fixed sum would not meet the case.[18]

Walter Lowrie has a system and a man to defend, but it should be noticed that he separates the question of their defensibility against the charges and complaints from the more general -- and to him more fundamental -- question, Can the General Assembly do any kind of effective job in getting into the details of administration? Lowrie does not under-

---

[18]The same, pp 438-439. Paragraphing supplied.

take to answer the question here. Those who have served as Board Secretaries would probably be agreed in feeling that the question is rhetorical, placed in order to ring a bell in the minds of commissioners who already feel that the details are up to the administrator, the big picture alone being the concern of the General Assembly. But this is a continuing question once the decision has been made to work with Boards. What constitutes a "detail" if we are to answer at all?

The exchange which follows on the floor of the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1848 is a powerful example of the able, aroused, positive, experienced Board Executive flattening his Board's critics with a hard-hitting, competent reply before the commissioners.[19] Walter Lowrie is speaking:

> It was with pain I heard the remarks made on the salary and expenses of Mr. Wilson, representing him as trying to get both his hands into the treasury of the Board.
>
> Judge Hepburn. --- I did not name any one, nor did I use that expression.
>
> Mr. Lowrie. --- As to the name, the brother read from a printed report, in the hands of the members, where the name is given. The expression is my own, nor was it too strong for the effort made to prove extravagance in the case of this agent.
>
> Now what are the facts of this case. Mr. Wilson reached this country, last fall was a year. As soon as he arrived, the Colonization Society offered him $2000 a year, if he would become their agent. His wish was to

---

[19] The Wilson whom Lowrie is defending is not the John Leighton Wilson of Harmony Presbytery, who at this time was still in Western Africa under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and had, as we saw in 1842 and 1843 when he was in correspondence with the Committee of Harmony Presbytery (above, pp 323-332), no connection with the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

take charge of a church, but with some reluctance he accepted an agency from the Foreign Board. His salary for the first year was just one half that had been offered from the Colonization Society. It was found that a residence in Winchester was inconvenient for his field of labour, and it was deemed best that he remove to Philadelphia, and that his salary be $1500. This sum is less than the average salaries of the pastors in that city. It is still $500 less than he could have received.

The travelling expenses amount to a large sum, but the distance travelled is large, being 8596 miles, from Georgia to Western New York.

Ten years ago Mr. Wilson was an agent for a short time in our service. Some of the brethren here recollect the meeting at the Synod of Philadelphia, in 1836. At that time this young brother subscribed $1000, all the money he had, in aid of this cause.

He has manifested the same spirit now, and yet this is one of the men, held up before this Assembly, and a crowded gallery, as extravagantly using the funds of the church.[20]

Every Board executive under fire has been grateful if he had the facts on his side as Walter Lowrie had them in the Assembly of 1848, and has been fortunate if he was as able on his feet as Lowrie. We can imagine that this former United States Senator's seven months' appearance in the South more than repaid the Board the $500 in travel expense which Lowrie paid out of his own pocket. We can picture James Henley Thornwell listening to this speech and remembering all too clearly the speech that same ex-senator had made with equal effect in defense of the Boards against Thornwell's own attack, mounted eight years before and on quite different grounds, there in the First Presbyterian Church of Augusta in the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia.

---

[20] "The General Assembly of 1848," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XX:3, July 1848, p 439.

But other Board questions were before the General Assembly this year of 1848, the most intriguing being the question of where the Board of [Domestic] Missions should be located. Between complaints of concentration of power in Philadelphia, and complaints from the west of absentee landlordism, there was pressure to relocate that Board west of the mountains.

We may treasure the speech made by Dr. William McDowell, Secretary of this Board, as the aboriginal archetype of speeches made in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in support of the marvelous notion that the ideal location for Presbyterian administrative offices -- especially those of domestic missions -- is the island of Manhattan. Dr. McDowell's rhetoric is fortunately preserved for us. He, "being called upon for an expression of his views," said:

> My decided conviction is, if a change must be made [from Philadelphia], which I certainly do not consider either necessary or wise --- but, if you must change, <u>for the benefit of the west</u> go east.
>
> Go to New York.
>
> The interests of the west I am persuaded would be much more effectually promoted by going to the city of New York, than by removing to any point which could be selected west of the mountains.
>
> While the operations in the west can be managed without difficulty, and with advantage, in any of our eastern cities, we ask how the missionary operations on the whole Atlantic coast, are to be managed from any point west of the mountains? Every man of practical good sense, who is at all conversant with the matter, must answer --- <u>It cannot be done to advantage</u>.
>
> The men, and the means for this whole field, east of the mountains, are here, not in the west; and the whole business is done, not in the west, but here.
>
> The operations east of the mountains, cannot be managed in the west without much loss and great embar-

> rassment. What, then, must be the natural and necessary result of a removal?[21]

So far we have had little direct involvement from Princeton Theological Seminary in the Old School Presbyterian debate on the administrations of missions. Indirectly, however, faithful readers of the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review begin to learn that from the Princeton standpoint, Thomas Smyth's analysis of ecclesiastical Boards as representing moderate, middle ground between extremes is more to the faculty's way of thinking than is Thornwell's suggestion that Boards are an extreme, with simple Presbyterian court action the middle between church Boards and Voluntary Societies. In analyzing the debate on the powers of the Board of Directors of the Theological Seminary, the Princeton Reviewers say,

> The Board of Missions, for example, is appointed for the conduct of our missionary operations. They receive their appointment from the Assembly; from that body they derive all their powers, and to it they are responsible for all their acts. They are the representatives and agents of the Assembly for a specific work. The Assembly itself does not conduct the missions, that office is delegated to the Board. In like manner the Directors of our Theological Seminaries, are appointed by the Assembly for the actual management of those institutions. They derive all their powers from the Assembly, and to it they are responsible for all their acts. But they can act within their legitimate

---

[21] The same, pp 442-443. Paragraphing supplied. No one has ever had the opportunity to find out the answer to that question. But by 1830, some 20 years before Dr. McDowell's speech, the center of population of the United States was in Ohio. For a discussion of later developments in this connection, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, p 367. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

> sphere. The Assembly does not and cannot exercise the task of immediate supervision, any more than it immediately conducts the work of missions. It never meets in the places where the Seminaries are located; it never has the professors before them; it never calls on them to report their mode of instruction; it never examines the students. This is the task which it has committed to the Directors.[22]

Clearly this envisages a Board which conducts work, which actually manages its work; and which reports to a General Assembly which does not and cannot exercise the task of immediate suppervision. The Board pictured by Princeton is the Board pictured by Thornwell, with only this difference: that Princeton sees nothing wrong with it, while Thornwell sees in this managing, conducting, supervising Board a new ecclesiastical entity, and new church authority, unknown to Scripture and to the Presbyterian constitution.

We may expect, from such opposite assessments of the same organism, a serious clash if the occasion arises for a direct confrontation of the two viewpoints.

In summing up their observations on the 1848 Presbyterian General Assembly, the Princeton Reviewers give us two good paragraphs, the first a great comfort to all those who have given up the easy paths of pastorate or foreign field and taken up the thankless cross of staff employment by a Board.

> It must indeed be very trying to the patience of the laborious and self-denying servants of the Church, who are engaged in a thankless office, sent to solicit money, and exposed to constant mortifications and difficulties, to be arraigned on vague rumors, and charged with serious negligence if nothing worse, before the whole Assembly, but the opportunity thus afforded them of vindicating their conduct removes many smothered

---

[22] The same, pp 447-448.

> misgivings, and calls forth the expression of the real estimate in which they are held by the church, and the attachment felt by the great body of our ministers and members to the work in which they are engaged.[23]

The second paragraph is briefer.

Reflecting on the Princeton situation, by which that Seminary was under a Board whose responsibility was to the General Assembly, the Princeton Reviewers felt that it was a peculiar advantage for such Seminaries that their ultimate appeal was to the representatives of the whole church. This meant, they observed, that "[t]hose Seminaries, therefore, cannot become materially corrupt, until the majority of the whole church is unfaithful to its trust."[24]

In 1849, the year of the California Gold Rush, the Commissioners heard, for what appears to have been the first time, a theme which has been reiterated through the intervening century and a quarter by all succeeding Secretaries of Foreign Missions without apparently a great deal of success in conveying its message to the pastors and members of the Presbyterian church.

> It is doubtless a very common impression that it is strange the amount contributed to the Foreign Mission Board is greater than that which is contributed to the Board of Domestic Missions. People ask why should more be given to send the gospel abroad, than to propagate and sustain it at home?

---

[23]The same, p 443. For an account of the mighty oak of Twentieth Century oratory which grew from this small acorn, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, pp 367-368. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[24]The same, p 448.

> Mr. Lowrie, when presenting the report of the Board of Foreign Missions, adverted to this subject, and very clearly pointed out the oversight on which this impression is founded. There is probably twenty times as much money contributed in our church for the support of the gospel at home as is given to send it to the millions of perishing heathen.[25]

The funds collected for Foreign Missions seem large, because they are listed in one place. They seem large because they are larger than those listed under any other Board. But all other Boards are but part of the forces deployed to the domestic tasks which are their assignment; only the Board of Foreign Missions enjoys a monopoly of one type of Presbyterian endeavor. Walter Lowrie was disturbed that this obvious fact seemed so easily to escape the attention of Presbyteries -- as any who have sat through inter-Board budget hearings can testify that it does.

From the standpoint of James Henley Thornwell and those who with him saw the Boards as standing between the church herself and her duty, this was a natural result of having a central Board of Foreign Missions. A Congregation or Presbytery must always see best those things which it is itself directly engaged in, and see appeals from distant bodies, no matter how prestigious, as secondary. Congregations in a denomination which in the aggregate spends, say, 175 million dollars a year for all causes, compare an annual Foreign Mission Board budget of 4 million not with 175 million but with their own total local congregational budget of something between five thousand dollars and 1 million dollars. As Thornwell put it, in our terms, giving to a Board is by definition giving to something <u>out there</u>, outside the Presby-

---

[25] "The General Assembly of 1849," <u>Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review</u>, XXI:3, July 1849, p 430. Additional paragraphing supplied.

terian structure which pastors and people live and work in.

At this 1849 Presbyterian General Assembly an annual Board report triggers a significant address by Mr. Irwin, for twelve years previous, and still, a missionary among the western Indians. The result of underfunding an effort comes out as clearly in his concrete situation as in any other one compact first-hand statement available. He says,

> As this is a subject of great interest to us, I will make a statement of facts, which may assist you in the conclusions to which you may come.
>
> It has been my privilege to be a servant of the church for twelve years among the western Indians, during which time I have had full opportunity of knowing the condition of the station.
>
> There is nothing which causes so much hindrance as the little help at our stations. I will give you a few facts. We have at our stations, including the missionaries' children, fifty of a family, and for that family we have but two girls to help us in the kitchen; and the Corresponding Secretary tells me we are better provided for than other stations. Our wives often become sick, and we become sick also, and have to attend to the kitchen ourselves. It is no disgrace to tell you that I have stood over the wash tub many a day; I have gone into the kitchen and cooked in the best way I could.
>
> You do not know these things. You want ministers and missionaries, and educated men; but there is a disposition to overlook these little matters; and let me tell you, the great matters are made up of the little matters. We want help of this kind more than we want help of any other description; and by sending us such help as girls for the kitchen and stewards, you just send the help we want; and you give the missionaries an opportunity to do their proper work. You do not want your missionaries to go into the kitchen. It is work that can be done by others[.][26]

---

[26]The same, pp 431-432.

The Princeton Reviewers, some of whom had known privation in earlier days on small salaries often in arrears, lent a sympathetic ear to Mr. Irwin's statement. "It is a question," they said, "which every member of the church should put to his conscience, whether we, as a church, are doing our duty in sending educated men to teach the gospel to the heathen, and then so poorly to sustain them as to render it necessary for them to stand at the wash tub.

> This is no degradation to them, but it is to the church who allows its missionaries, whether foreign or domestic, to be reduced to such straits.
>
> This is not that justice and equality which Christ has enjoined; equality, not as to income, but as to adequate support, which it is the obvious duty of the church to provide for all those whom she sends to preach the gospel, in her stead, to the people.[27]

We remember again the position taken by Thornwell: that a Presbytery regularly receiving and discussing the reports

---

[27]The same, p 432. Mr. Irwin got nowhere, of course, so far as any General Assembly actions on funds and budget for Indian missions were concerned.

> An Annual Report of the Reverend Charles Colcock Jones during his brief tenure of office as Secretary of the Board of [Domestic] Missions would state that in 1852, three years after Mr. Irwin's speech on the floor of the General Assembly, the average annual salary paid by the Board to their missionaries was $132.00, which, added to the "aid" received from the people to whom they ministered, made a total annual average salary of $372.00. "This was an advance," Mr. Jones said, "on the previous year," and the Board of [Domestic] Missions was "desirous of increasing this allowance."
>
> Jones might seem a proper target for opprobrium, since he was a man of large plantations in deepest Georgia, on which he normally lived surrounded by a host of black slave servants who made his hospitality world-famous. The difficulty in casting stones at

of her own missionaries will be stirred up to her proper responsibility as the natural result of her having undertaken her responsibilities in her own organic capacity. Those concerned with the basic effect of Boards on the church had said that no report to the Board, and no speech on the floor of the General Assembly in connection with the report by the Board, can possibly reach pastors and people with the direct involvement which the Lord's commission requires of his church.

Jones lies in the fact that as a son of a wealthy planter he had no need whatever to enter the Presbyterian ministry, and far less need, having become one, to wear out his frail constitution in the tropics by fifteen years of sacrificial exposure and overwork as a volunteer missionary to the black slaves of Liberty County, Georgia. This he did. His stay in Philadelphia was short because the climate there proved even worse for his weakened frame than the fevers of the coastal south had done.

PRINCETON GETS INVOLVED: AND, INDIA MISSIONARY RANKIN OFFERS A STATISTIC

The year 1850 marks an event which though small in itself was to prove a milestone in the history of the Debate on the Administration of Missions in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

Until now the public battle has been waged principally by southerners. Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, Benjamin Mosby Smith, James Henley Thornwell, Thomas Smyth, John Calkins Coit, Benjamin Gildersleeve, John Leighton Wilson -- all these whose arguments we have previously followed in some detail are of the Southern regions of the Presbyterian church. Only the presence of the Pennsylvanian, Walter Lowrie, at the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia in 1840, has intruded on this essentially southern debate.

John Bailey Adger, reviewing these events from a later perspective, would attribute the southern orientation of the agitation to the fact that the Presbyterian church in the south was more homogeneously composed of the Scotch-Irish immigration which carried the Presbyterian concept in more purity than any other, in all its Scots adamantine, and at the same time had been less exposed to the erosion concomitant with the propinquity of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and the Northwest to New England men, methods and

ideas.[1]

We have seen hints of a Princeton attitude towards these issues, but nothing yet in the form of a definite, developed position.

Now, in its review of the 1850 General Assembly, Princeton offers the first extensive exposition of her views on Presbyterian Boards.

There had been efforts made to secure changes. The debates in the Assembly had not gone far into the merits of the question. Only Breckinridge of all the familiar anti-Board faces was this year a commissioner, and his attention was devoted primarily to an unsuccessful effort to obtain an action from the General Assembly in support of the Union, threatened afresh at that time.[2]

> The efforts at reform, made in connection with the report of the Board of [Domestic] Missions, failed.
>
> We sincerely rejoice in this decisive expression of the opinion of the Assembly against such innovations[, wrote the Princeton Reviewers]. Organic changes, except in case of real emergency, are great evils, and therefore should be very rarely resorted to.
>
> Our Boards have answered well. They are highly

---

[1] John B[ailey] Adger, My Life and Times, 1810-1899, p 363. Adger's view has been criticized for not taking fully into account the New England and Huguenot strands entering into Presbyterianism in the South. But his point is that this may be considered minor in comparison to the long-term influx in the Northern states directly neighboring upon New England and the Western Reserve.

[2] "The General Assembly of 1850," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XXII:3, July 1850, p 442. Breckinridge's motion was indefinitely postponed by a vote of 103 to 79.

conservative bodies. They prevent the concentration of power in a few hands. If they are either abolished or rendered inefficient everything is thrown under the control of a small executive committee.

To such committee it might be very pleasant, at times, to be perfectly independent, except so far as a nominal responsibility to the Assembly is concerned. We say nominal responsibility, for it can scarcely be more. The Assembly is too large a body, sits too short a time, and has too much to do, to allow of its exercising, in ordinary matters, a real controlling supervision over executive officers. It is the ultimate court of appeal in great cases.

But the Board can be called at any time, can prolong its sessions, can concentrate its attention, and in a manner really effective inspect, the action of the executive committee. This is a great security, and a great relief to the committees themselves. It throws the responsibility from some six or eight on a body of sixty or eighty drawn from every part of the church.

It is true the attendance on the meetings of the Board is not always large; but it is generally a body several times more numerous than its executive committee; and cases of real diffi culty, can hardly fail to secure an adequate attendance. On many occasions the healthful action of the Board in modifying or revising that of the committee has been gratefully acknowledged by the executive officers themselves.[3]

Here in compact form are views conveying basic positions which warrant our close attention. Upon analysis we see the following set of principles emerge from Princeton in relation to Presbyterian Boards:

1. Presbyterian Ecclesiastical Boards for the conduct of Benevolent work are the Given of the situation.

2. Proposed changes from the Given constitute innovations.

3. Princeton rejoices in the decisive rejection of such

---

[3]The same, p 455-456. Additional paragraphing supplied.

innovations by the General Assembly.

4. Organic changes, except in cases of real emergency, are great evils.

5. Organic changes should be very rarely resorted to.

6. Presbyterian Boards have served their purpose well.

7. Presbyterian Boards are highly conservative bodies.

8. Presbyterian Boards prevent the concentration of power in a few hands, those of the executive committee.

9. The responsibility of an Executive Committee to the General Assembly can be only nominal.

10. The General Assembly is unsuited for exercising in ordinary matters a real controlling supervision over executive officers.

11. The General Assembly's role is that of a court of appeal.

12. The Board, in case of need, can be called at any time and when necessary give such effective controlling supervision.

13. The large membership of the Board is for such emergency use. Its normally light attendance is no drawback for routine affairs.

This section of the Princeton Reviewers' statement has dealt with the Boards themselves. The second section deals with a feature of Board structure which the Boards' opponents have touched on only tangentially: the staff Executive, known in this period as the Secretary but called by its

modern name by the Princeton Reviewers.

It is not organic changes we want.

> Executive ability is all that it is necesary to make the Boards, with their present organization, answer all the ends of their appointment. This is shown not only in the great enlargement of the operations of the Board of Missions under the long and faithful administration of its late secretary, Dr. William McDowell, but in the ease with which the new department of church extension was engrafted on the other operations of that Board.
>
> If they are blessed in securing the services of a man of efficiency and of true constructive intellect, we doubt not the church will see the Board of Missions expand itself into proportions adequate to the growth of the country, and the great subject of ministerial support thoroughly discussed and satifactorily disposed of.[4]

From this second section emerge the following additional Princeton principles in regard to the administration of Presbyterian mission operations:

14. Executive ability is all that is necessary to make the present Board structure fulfill its purpose.

15. The needed requirements in the Executive are
    a) efficiency, and
    b) true constructive intellect.

At this point we now have the necessary data in hand for an instructive comparative analysis.

We see that in any future conversation on the subject of Boards between the Southern School and the Princeton School, we may expect complete disagreement in detail because of a clear disagreement in the following fundamentals:

. . . . . .

---

[4]The same, p 456. Paragraphing supplied.

(1) For the Southern School led by Thornwell, the Presbyterian court structure is the Given; for the Princeton School [led by Hodge], the Board structure is the Given.

(2) For the Southern School led by Thornwell, organic change and innovation are neutral, having no inherent moral bearing on the choice of structures or procedures; for the Princeton School [led by Hodge], innovative organic changes, except in cases of great emergency, are great evils and should be very rarely resorted to.

(3) For the Southern School led by Thornwell, Presbyterian Boards have signally failed to enlist even one half of the churches in the benevolent work of the Presbyterian church, and must pragmatically be accounted a failure; for the Princeton School [led by Hodge], the Boards have accomplished all the things enumerated in their Annual Reports, and must pragmatically be accounted a success.

(4) For the Southern School, led by Thornwell, the Board structure represents a threefold concentration of power: locally in Philadelphia, oligarchically in interlocking participative membership, and personally in the power of the Secretary; for the Princeton School, [led by Hodge,] the Boards prevent the concentration of power in the hands of the Executive Committee.

(5) For the Southern School, led by Thornwell, the Boards represent a twofold fatal attack on Presbyterian church government:

(a) they positively perform in non-Presbyterial bodies as Boards, and prelatically through their Secretaries, the work committed to a church which in matters of church government is fundamentally committed to Presbyterial group action and against prelatical action; and

(b) they negatively prevent the performance of these responsibilities by the Presbyterial bodies of the Presbyterian church; but,

For the Princeton School, [led by Hodge,] the Boards require and must have strong, vigorous, capable Executives. The necessary corrolaries are implied by the Princeton School and are stated in part: efficient, intelligent executive force functions

(a) at the expense of Committee or Board force, which are regarded as inherently inadequate for the function, and

(b) at the expense of the antiprelatical principle embodied in the Presbyterian concept of the government of church affairs, which is also regarded as inherently inadequate for the function.

(6) For the Southern School, led by Thornwell, the basic requirement, explicitly stated, of those primarily responsible for the conduct of Presbyterian mission activities, is spiritual; for the Princeton School, [led by Hodge,] the basic requirement, explicitly stated, of those primarily responsible for the conduct of Presbyterian mission activities, is efficiency and intellect.[5]

* * * * * * *

The General Assembly of 1851 is devoid of debate from

---

[5]Although the clues are indirect, the record of successive General Assemblies from 1839 to 1861 gives indications of the gradually widening breach of mutual disagreement on fundamental outlook between north and south, against which the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America struggled more successfully than any other American body save the Episcopalian, though in the end coming to a parting of the ways.

our standpoint. From either side, only Pierpont E. Bishop is present. He is only a sympathizer, hardly a debater.

1852 is more fruitful.

We find John Bailey Adger writing in May on the eve of the Assembly, which is meeting in his home town of Charleston. Adger is running over with pre-Assembly politics, the moderatorial candidates (Breckinridge, Boardman, Young; the Princeton candidate); but he is most concerned of all about the local legacy of the New School division, which had led the Presbytery of Charleston Union to go independent of both General Assemblies.[6]

After the Assembly Adger writes again. "I quite agree with you," he tells Thornwell, "that haste & confusion characterized [the proceedings of the General Assembly here] more than any other reputable quality." On the Elder question, he thinks, not ten men in the house knew what the committee report meant, and the Moderator hurried it through as routine. The action on Charleston Union Presbytery fills him with indignation. He is out of heart on many things -- starting with Charleston Union.[7]

We find, however, that this 1852 General Assembly has important things for us to observe between its lines, instructive on the subject of the success of the Boards in leading

---

[6]John Bailey Adger in Charleston, South Carolina, to James Henley Thornwell in Columbia, South Carolina, May 24, 1852. Thornwell Collection, the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina. MSS.

[7]John Bailey Adger in Charleston, South Carolina, to James Henley Thornwell in Columbia, South Carolina, June 14, 1852. Thornwell Collection, the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina. MSS.

the Presbyterian church in her corporate responsibilities as a missionary society.

The Assembly is meeting in what is, as it will remain, one of the strongest citadels of the old-line South. Here the blacks are the blackest, the whites the supremest, the lines and patterns the most fixed. At the appointed hour we hear the Reverend J. C. Rankin, a missionary. When elected as a commissioner to the Assembly, he said, he "thought of the reports of these Boards as among the most important matters which this body would be called to attend to."

> He still believed that, compared with these, the general business of the Assembly was of minor consequence.

Mr. Rankin then addressed the Assembly with great earnestness and feeling in reference to missions in India, and the importance of[8] an increase of the missionary spirit amongst us.

Charleston, as is well known to students of her history, is the city where Presbyterian evangelistic and pastoral work among the slave population progressed to such a point, that an unfailingly impressive black church, Zion, became the showpiece of its sponsors. Mr. Rankin was not a statistician, and the article by Charles Hodge which brings us an account of his remarks does not supply us with those which Rankin omits; but what he has heard has reminded Rankin of the statistics he does know: those of white Presbyterian giving to benevolences.

> He had heard, since he came here, that there were in our Presbyterian churches in this city 500 coloured communicants, and that they gave on an average $3 each

. . . . . .

[8] Charles Hodge, "The General Assembly of 1852," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XXIV:3, July 1852, p 470.

> to objects of benevolence. He felt rejoiced in view of that fact, but he also felt ashamed.[9] This was much more than our white members were doing.

Thus the Boards have induced the free members of Presbyterian Church in the United States of America to give, to the denomination's missionary enterprize, appreciably less annually per capita, than what the propertyless black Presbyterian slaves of darkest Charleston give. Breckinridge, Thornwell and Coit will never be able to understand why such a record can be called Success. Hodge, though momentarily astounded, will never judge the Boards by such an external, even repulsive, measure.

We learn that the Synods of Virginia and Pittsburgh are still conducting their operations as independent auxiliaries of the Board of Foreign Misions, "with efficiency and success," Hodge comments,[10] and in a long free-for-all on the question of what professors shall be assigned to teach what subjects in what departments at the Seminary, we get an insight into why the Princeton Reviewers are convinced that whatever else it may be, the Presbyterian General Assembly is not the body to exercise detailed supervision over its particular works.[11]

Perhaps the most inspired effort made during the proceedings comes from an unnamed member after exceedingly long and exceedingly warm discussions on whether or not to found an Assembly-sponsored Assembly-funded Cheap Paper. The report and resolutions of the Committee which had favoured the project are "rejected by the Assembly."

---

[9] The same.

[10] The same, p 475.

[11] The same, pp 489-490.

> A member then moved that it be referred to the same committee, with instructions never to report again on the same subject.[12]

Charles Hodge was not famous as a humorist, and some forms of humor (such as stories about Alabama turtles) failed to rouse in him that hearty laughter its perpetrators aimed after. But it is to Hodge that we are indebted for the record of this higher spot in the history of the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1852.

Professor Cornelius Osgood of Yale, in his unexpected best seller The Koreans and Their Culture, contrasts the increasingly glowing annual reports of the Japanese Governor General of Korea, with the sudden (and, to read the preceding reports, entirely inexplicable) outbreak of Korean protest in 1919. A similar curious non sequitur has emerged in 1850-1852, we see, from the history of the Presbyterian debate on the administration of missions.

* * * * * * *

With the General Assembly of 1853 the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America begins to witness a seven-year acceleration of the tempo of her discussions and debate on her administration of missions. We have noted in the leaner years that even without prominent personalities to press the issues, one facet or another indicative of attitudes towards some aspect of the issues in the debate usually rise to the surface of an Assembly's deliberations.

We turn now to the period of accelerated tempo.

. . . . . .

---

[12] The same, p 484

CHARLES HODGE SHEDS A DARK LIGHT

As the Presbyterian debate on mission administration begins to warm up again after a decade of relative quiet, we find the following matters which bear on our inquiry.

1. The Assembly of 1853 institutes an important advance in its machinery for exercising its oversight of the Boards: the erection of a separate Standing Committee of the Assembly for each of the Boards. We note with interest not only the action but its source.

> On motion of Mr. Lowrie, it was
>
> Resolved, That hereafter four additional Standing Committees shall be appointed by the Moderator (the number of members on each Committee to be left to the discretion of the Moderator), one for each Board of the Church, to which the reports of the Boards respectively shall be referred, as well as such other matter relating to them respectively, as the Assembly may direct.
>
> Whilst this resolution was pending, Mr. Lowrie observed that he was in favour of referring the buisness of the several Boards to Standing Committees, who should have charge of all business connected with the several subjects referred to them, which he deemed a preferable arrangement to that which at present prevailed.
>
> It was highly important that these agencies should enjoy the entire confidence of the Church, and nothing would more promote this very desirable object, than a

reference to their proceedings to Committees of the whole body. This would prevent a danger, otherwise inevitable, of having the weighty concerns confided to the several Boards getting entirely into the hands of a few individuals.

He would add that the proposed arrangement had been fully considered by the Secretaries of the Boards, and met with their entire and hearty concurrence.[1]

2. Walter Lowrie, in presenting the Report of the Board of Foreign Missions, has news which seems a surprise to Dr. Hodge:

He proclaimed the astounding fact, that more than half our churches had, this year, given nothing to this sacred cause; and they contained one-third of all our communicants.

A few of these might have given to the American Board, and a few given to both, but the number of them was small.[2]

3. The Reverend John Leighton Wilson, "a returned missionary from Africa"[3] and commissioner from Harmony Presbytery, addresses the General Assembly on the present state and future prospects of the missionary cause there.[4] His address is impressive. Much to his surprise a special meeting of the Board of Foreign Missions elects him to the new Assistant

---

[1]Charles Hodge, "The General Assembly of 1853," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XXV:3, July 1853, pp 453-454. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[2]The same, p 462.

[3]Hodge nowhere indicates that Wilson's service was under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

[4]Hodge, GA 1853, BRPR XXV:3, July 1853, pp 464-465.

Secretaryship the growth of its office requires.[5] In this "unsought and unexpected" post[6] our defender of the American Board begins a second career in the Presbyterian Board Rooms, and becomes prepared for his third career in the Southern Presbyterian Executive Committee Rooms as a thorough defender of the Board system under whatever name it may be called.

4. The Board of [Domestic] Missions illustrates some of the problems the less glamorous, more easily inspected operations can run into. The new Secretary, Charles Colcock Jones, tells us of the average annual salary of our home missionaries ($372.00, including contributions from the field in addition to Board support).[7] "Bred in the counting-room," Jones implies that the long tenure of his predecessor had done much for the work, but little to devise an adequate accounting system.

> When he [Jones] came into office the whole system had to be remodelled.
>
> As soon as he could get competent clerks, he had a new set of books opened, on the double entry system; and the accounts were now so fully methodized, that a person who understood bookkeeping, could begin at one end and find out, by going through, everything that had been done.

---

[5] Hampden C[oit] DuBose, Memoirs of Rev. John Leighton Wilson, D. D. [1808-1886], p 230. His associate in the Board Rooms, William Rankin, tells the story, and states that at the special meeting of the Board, "the Hon. Walter Lowrie, Sr.," made the motion that Wilson be elected.

[6] Letter from John Leighton Wilson in Pittsfield to his sister in South Carolina, June 15, 1853, as quoted by DuBose, Memoirs of JLW, p 230. By this date he was about decided to accept the position.

[7] Hodge, GA 1853, BRPR XXV:3, July 1853, p 477.

> He...would say, that if accounts were to be kept straight, rules must be strict, and strictly enforced. Their Treasurer was a thorough merchant and accountant.[8]

5. However, bookeeping well done cannot guarantee satisfaction out in the churches. Mr. Edwards of Fort Wayne Presbytery in darkest Indiana rises to decry the tendency of our Boards to centralization. From his position in the west he sees an extra-constitutional power arisen among us.

> These Boards were not ecclesiastical existences, and yet they[9] were exercising the same power as a Presbytery.

This appears to be the first statement from outside the South, on the floor of the General Assembly, that the Boards are in fact doing what Thornwell said they did and what Smyth denied their doing.

Edwards now proceeds to put his stamp of approval on another charge levelled against the Boards earlier in the pages of the debate between the Southerners. The Secretaries, it had been asserted, controlled the rest of the machinery, so that what passed for Assembly control was what in more vulcanized age would be called rubber-stamping.

> It had, however, been said[, Edwards continued,] that the Secretary was only obeying the orders of the

---

[8]The same, p 494. Jones, with large financial interests of his own, will not be one to leave loose ends in keeping track of funds in his care. The reference to the Treasurer implies an understanding of and respect for the scruples of those who oppose Boards for their diversion of ministers into financial responsibilities, as well as publicity for the arrangement's sensibility and efficiency.

[9]Hodge, GA 1853, XXV:3, July 1853, pp 489-490.

Assembly.

Yes, but he had yesterday shown that these orders were all of his own penning. They all emanated from him.

He should like to know whether, in a previous meeting of the Board, the Secretary had not expressly said that he repudiated the sustentation principle?[10]

In fact, the western commissioner says, the result is one man's power to get what he wants.

In carrying out his own views, he had got the Assembly to adopt them.

Mr. Edwards wanted to be set right.

All expressions of personal kindness and confidence were, as he said yesterday, to be taken for granted; but the real difficulty in the case was, that the Board had usurped the power of the Presbyteries.

He went into some details as to Fort Wayne Presbytery, all whose statements had been disregarded.[11]

6. The voice of Princeton expresses what for it is a new note on the subject of ecclesiastical Boards. Other Presbyterian Boards, and the Board of [Domestic] Missions under earlier administrations, had been defended by Princeton against their detractors. With Jones of Georgia at the Board of [Domestic] Missions, and with grass-roots complaints coming onto the floor from an Indiana Presbytery, Charles Hodge opens the door a crack.

No complaint was made on the floor of the Assembly, [Hodge observes in his evaluation of the 1853 sessions], and we have heard no complaint, as to the spirit, the ability, or enterprise, with which the service of the

. . . . . .

---

[10]The same, p 490.

[11]The same, italics added. Additional paragraphing supplied.

Board of Missions is conducted.

The only difference is, as to the principles which should control its action.

These principles can only be settled by free discussion. We hope, therefore, that the matter will not rest with the decision of the last Assembly, but that the discussion may continue until some plan is hit upon which shall satisfy all parties.[12]

We have come now to the close of the period of relative quiescience in the debate turning from 1839 to 1861 in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America on the administration of missions. Beginning with the General Assembly of 1854 the pressure for reform rises, and the relative monopoly of the Princeton Review on commentary is challenged once more by other publications. They will have a different attitude from Princeton's.

As during our trip to the sessions of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, our hours at the General Assemblies of 1840 through 1853 have been largely unspectacular, but not without significant discoveries. We find certain themes and trends discernible even when active, lengthy debate on the administration of missions is muted. We find it true that the Assembly, in contrast to Synod, Presbytery and Session, has little continuity in its membership. The Board Secretaries alone are present and speaking, year after year.

We look now at two items from this period which throw light on Princeton.

The first is a letter from Charles Hodge to his son Caspar Wistar Hodge, written while the General Assembly of 1853 was in session nearby in Philadelphia. Long and detail-

---

[12]The same, p 510.

ed, it is given over almost entirely to the Assembly. Where the Minutes of that body are laconic, and where Hodge's own review of the proceedings in the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review gives the impression of a body whose activities are calm, integrated and majestic, Hodge's letter written from the spot is a series of detailed discussions of involved moves, movements, and elections. It is written "as much to Dr. Alexander as yourself." Signed "Your father C. Hodge" in the custom of a day when family affections were warm but the literary expression of them took different forms from those the 20th Century expects, this letter reminds us that the active politics and interconnections of men, including Presbyterians, are not always seen clearly in their official publications.[13]

The second is a more mixed public expression of principle than we are accustomed to receiving from Hodge. It occupies the closing pages of his review of the 1853 Presbyterian General Assembly. Read in certain lights it gives us pause.

"Admitting that the will of the Church is authoritative," he begins, "how is that will to be ascertained?" This is a surprising admission from a major defender of the Westminster Standards, and though we are sure that he must have in mind some limited definition of his regulative word, authoritative, we read on with more than ordinary interest. Charles Hodge says,

> Admitting that the will of the Church is authorita-

---

[13] Charles Hodge in Philadelphia to [Caspar] Wistar Hodge in Princeton, May 25, 1853. File D; Hodge, Charles, 1797-1878. Speer Library, Princeton Theological Seminary. MSS.

tive --- how is that will to be ascertained?

We answer: first by the legitimate action of her appropriate organs.

To us the General Assembly is the organ for expressing the will of our whole Church, and if any man refuses to regard the decision of the Assembly as the voice of the Church, he must show good reason for so refusing.

It, no doubt, often happens that the acts of the Assembly are hasty, inconsiderate, and erroneous --- not expressing the deliberate judgment even of the members present, much less of the whole Church. We are very far from saying that every decision of the Assembly is to be regarded as expressing the voice of the Church; but such decision is prima facie evidence of what the mind of the Church is; and if it is contested it must be for reasons given.[14]

A question immediately arises in our minds. If the General Assembly then is the organ for expressing the will of our whole church, yet its acts are often hasty, inconsiderate and erroneous, then in the concrete case of doubtful General Assembly action how is the authoritative will of the church to be known?

This same question has evidently occurred to Professor Hodge, though not quite in that form. He continues along lines that are even more interesting to us. Without pause Charles Hodge elaborates,

> It is not, however, only through the action of public bodies that public sentiment is known; neither does the Church manifest her will exclusively through ecclesiastical courts. There are a thousand channels of communication from the whole to the several parts. The inward convictions of the Church manifest themselves in a thousand ways, so that practically there is seldom any difficulty in determining what that mind is.[15]

---

[14]Hodge, GA 1853, BRPR XXV:3, July 1853, p 519.

[15]The same, pp 519-520.

This is both perplexing and fascinating. Fascinating, because Hodge is increasingly becoming the Mr. Presbyterian of the century. Yet in contrast to the studied conclusions of his contemporary James Henley Thornwell of Columbia, he does not restrict the authoritative expression of the will of the Presbyterian church to the acts and decisions of her constitutional ecclesiastical courts. Perplexing, because although his announced topic is a serious one, how to know what is the authoritative will of the church, Hodge says that there are a thousand ways in which the inward convictions of the church are made manifest; his conclusion, from the multitude of varying, presumably shifting ways and channels, is that this variety and flux makes it easy, not difficult, to know what the mind of the church is.

Were this all that Hodge had to say in the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review about the authoritative will of the church, we might move on in no more than fascination and perplexity. But he has something to add. As its implications sink in, it brings us up short. Charles Hodge of Princeton adds forthwith:

> What we are concerned about is, asserting for the ~~mind~~ mind of the Church an authority paramount to the private preferences or opinions of individuals.[16]

By paramount Hodge does not mean "equal," or "tantamount," he means superior.[17] He does not say he is asserting

---

[16]The same, p 520.

[17]William Allen Neilson, Thomas A. Knott, and Paul W. Carhart, Editors, Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, Second Edition Unabridged. Springfield: G. and C. Merriam Company, 1940:

> paramount....[Old French par amont, above, from

for the mind of the church a credibility, a reasonableness, or a respect, he says authority, authority which is superior, chief, supreme, preeminent. In the increasingly preeminent Presbyterian, Hodge, this is chilling. Where is the freedom of conscience of the individual? If this view comes to prominence in Presbyterian thought, and in time becomes the operative principle of the Presbyterian Church, where will the statement of the Westminster standards apply, that God alone is Lord of the conscience?

As Hodge begins to join the debate on the administration of missions, we naturally tend to weigh his thinking in reference to the issues of the debate. In their light, what Charles Hodge of Princeton adds next as his conclusion stands out like a bar of cold-rolled steel:

> If the Church calls a man to the work of foreign missions, it is not competent to him to say "I think I can do more good at home;" or, if she calls him to be a teacher, it is not for him to say "I think I can be more useful as a pastor."[18]

One of the issues of the debate is on the lodgement of the church's decision-making process as she exercises jurisdiction over her ordained ministers, controlling their placement, transfer and recall. Hodge has earlier made it clear that he would in regard to missionaries lodge this power of decision in the Board structure and not in the presbyterially organized courts of the church. The call a

---

par, through, by + amont, above, from a (from Latin ad) to + mont, mountain....] Having a higher or the highest rank or jurisdiction; superior to all others; chief; supreme; pre-eminent; -- often with to; as a duty paramount to all. "A traitor paramount." Bacon. Synonym --See DOMINANT. [Abbreviations expanded].

[18] Hodge, GA 1853, BRPR XXV:3, July 1853, p 520.

Church issues to a man to the work of foreign missions envisaged in this closing paragraph from Hodge is -- by his prior commitment to the Board structure, and by his statement made moments earlier that the Church's mind need not necessarily be known through the action of her General Assembly but through a wealth of other channels, -- not something that comes from the presbyters assembled, but from the Board.

Another of the issues of the debate is on the lodgement of the church's executive jurisdiction over her ordained ministers, controlling their placement, transfer and recall. By the form of government basic to Presbyterian concepts, this executive jurisdiction is lodged in colleges of presbyters and not in one ecclesiastical executive, the prelate. It has already been made clear in the Princeton commentary on the 1850 General Assembly that in the Princeton view the essential need in the Board structure to make it work is executive ability, majoring in efficiency and intellect.[19] If the Board structure lacks this, we have been assured, it will not answer the ends of its appointment. But if executive efficiency and intellect are supplied, and mean for Hodge what they usually mean in the affairs of men, the Church which calls a man to the work of foreign missions through her Board of Foreign Missions will by that efficient executive necessary to her Board's operation tend inevitably towards what in practice must be the executive's choice and issuance of that call.

Well and good; but now Hodge's concluding language weighs increasingly heavy on the listening ear if that ear is Presbyterian in more than name. "If the Church calls a man to the work of foreign missions, it is not competent to him

---

[19] GA 1850, BRPR XXII:3, July 1850, p 456.

to say "I think I can do more good at home;" or, if she calls him to be a teacher, it is not for him to say "I think I can be more useful as a pastor."[20]

These are chilling views in the context of the debate and in the context of Hodge's growing leadership and authority.

Where now is the three-fold call of the Holy Spirit, who must be heard by the man, by the field, and by the Presbytery, before the Presbyterian church will consider the call valid? Where soon, if this conclusion grows to its own logical conclusions, is the moral propriety in disobeying the call of the Board of Missions heard in the call of the executive whom we are not competent to contradict in our thoughts?

In forming our tentative judgments about what Hodge's full positions may be, if and when he joins the debate on Boards full scale, we cannot rely solely on what we can gather by the end of the General Assembly of 1853. But we seem safe in forming the impression that if he does join, it will be on the opposite side from James Henley Thornwell.

---

[20]Hodge, GA 1853, BRPR XXV:3, July 1853, p 520.

STUART ROBINSON CORRECTS CHARLES HODGE

The standing reproach of the historian is his captivity to his sources. Fortunate the man, a wise historian has remarked, who can rest his case on the sources. Even more fortunate he, it might be added, who has more than one source to rest on.

With the General Assembly of 1854 of the Presbyterian Church in the United States in America we come into a new primary source. The Minutes we have always had, but they are bare bones and tell little of the debates and even less of the background. The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review we have throughout this period, but it is a party paper and a very smooth, attractive one. To give us the mind of Princeton, or the mind which Princeton would like to see adopted in the church, the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review is invaluable. It also has the advantage of being compact, and widely available in major libraries. But in 1854 Stuart Robinson, who had been at the Assembly, taken part in it, and read Charles Hodge's account of what happened,[1] decided it

---

[1]Charles Hodge, "The General Assembly of 1854," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XXVI:3, July 1854, pp 545-580.

was time for what he viewed as propaganda to be replaced by what he viewed as fact. In January of 1855 he was published in The Southern Presbyterian Review.[2]

The reader accustomed to the easy measure of the prose of Charles Hodge finds Stuart Robinson less polished, -- but more arresting. We may compare and contrast the two accounts by presenting Hodge first.

---

[2] [Stuart Robinson,] "The General Assembly of 1854," The Southern Presbyterian Review, VIII:3, January 1855, pp 411-454.

The Reverend Stuart Robinson was born in Strabane, County Tyrone, Ireland, on November 14, 1814. Seriously injured as an infant by a nurse, he was brought by his family to America as they immigrated to Virginia. A student at Amherst College and at the senior Union Theological Seminary, the one in Virginia, Robinson served on the faculty of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, before graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1841. He was then licensed and ordained by Greenbrier Presbytery in the western mountains of Virginia, and installed as pastor of the Kanawha Salines Presbyterian Church at what is now Malden.

Robinson was Presbyterian pastor in Frankfort, Kentucky; Baltimore; Louisville; and was briefly at the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, which he split. In addition to his early teaching experience at Princeton, he was from 1856 to 1858 on the faculty of the Presbyterian Seminary in Danville, Ken tucky. He edited publications in Baltimore and Louisville; the Federal Government suppressed his True Presbyterian in 1862. From then to 1865 Robinson found it advisable for his health to spend his time in Toronto.

There is evidence that the real source of the Southern Presbyterian position on the Spirituality of the Church, attributed in recent years to others, following the line of those who in the decades between 1865 and 1895 attributed it to James Henley Thornwell, stemmed in fact largely from Stuart Robinson's detailed exposition of that principle in the document adopted by the excised wing of the Synod of Kentucky of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and to

In the matter of Boards, the report of the Board of Foreign Missions comes before the Assembly this year well ahead of that of the Board of [Domestic] Missions. John Bailey Adger is a commissioner from old Charleston Presbytery, having been elected with Thomas Smyth the year before but providentially hindered, and returned again this year by a Presbytery which fully agreed with Thornwell, who had written at the time,

> We have sent Adger and Dr. Smyth to the General Assembly. Adger is one of the truest men I know; a man after God's own heart. It is a great pity that his eyes incapacitate him for regular and steady labour.[3]

There having been some systematic Benevolence work in the Synod of South Carolina and her presbyteries along the lines so warmly advocated by Thornwell, Coit, Adger, and others, Adger does not miss the opportunity to bring the resulting comparative statistics to the attention of the Assembly. As Hodge reports it,

---

which the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States formally agreed as a part of its actions which received that Synod. For a discussion of this evidence, see Jack P. Maddex, "From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State." Journal of Presbyterian History, 54:4, Winter 1976, pp 438-457.

Moderator in 1869 of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and vigorous promoter of home mission work in the mountains of eastern Kentucky, Stuart Robinson died in Louisville on October 3, 1881, after 23 years there as pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church.

[3] James Henley Thornwell at South Carolina College, to Thomas E[phraim] Peck, April 15, 1853, as carried in Palmer, Life of JHT, p 372.

> Dr. Adger entered into some statistical comparisons, in order to show that the Synod of South Carolina had contributed more in proportion than other Synods to the cause of Foreign Missions, because, as he suggested, "the ministers and sessions just go forward and do the work themselves."
>
> "They had no machinery at all."[4]

In Adger's mind as we know, by machinery he means the Agent system, and by Presbyterian machinery he means the Sessions, Presbyteries, and Synod, together with the pastors, elders, deacons and members.

> "This," he regarded, "as an illustration of the admirable work of our Presbyterian machinery."
>
> This is very encouraging[, Hodge comments.] The great design of machinery, so far as raising funds is concerned, is to induce "ministers and sessions to do the work themselves." And if South Carolina has advanced so far as to do without the machinery, which less favoured portions of the Church still need, it is a matter of rejoicing. We hope the example may have its due weight in exciting and guiding effort.[5]

This is agreeable to Hodge, who for some time has been in favor of agents doing more encouraging and less collecting.

The report of the Board of [Domestic] Missions occasions more difficulty.[6]

Dr. Adger now appears before us as a member of the minority of the Assembly's Committee making recommendations

---

[4]Charles Hodge, "The General Assembly of 1855," Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, XXVI:3, July 1854, p 549. Paragraphing added.

[5]The same. Paragraphing added.

[6]The same. The word Domestic is yet to be officially added.

in this area. The majority proposal is to erect a new Board of Church Extension, separate from the Board of Domestic Missions; Dr. Adger, speaking for the minority, entertains other views. Dr. Hodge does not tell us that Adger is also Chairman of the Committee; the omission, however, tells us something about Dr. Hodge.

> The Rev. Dr. Adger, from the minority of the same Committee, presented a report, proposing to refer the whole subject of Church Extension back to the Board of Missions; that the Board have authority to appoint a co-ordinate Secretary, but without exclusive reference to Church Extension; that the Board have leave to contribute to Church Extension from their general missionary fund; and calling upon the churches to give more liberally to the Board, in view of this increased demand upon its resources.
>
> Dr. Adger said there was a wide difference between these two reports.
>
> The majority report looks to the erection of Church Extension into a separate Board.
>
> The minority dissent from the majority report, because unwilling to endorse further the system of agencies, and also because they object to a fifth specific collection.[7]

Four special offerings a year seem enough to Adger.

At this point the Reverend Stuart Robinson comes before us for the first time as a participant in the debate on the adminstration of missions held in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America between 1839 and 1861.[8] He is

---

[7]Hodge, GA 1855, BRPR XXXVI:3, July 1854, p 558. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[8]See above, p 391, Note 2.

supported by the Reverend George Dodd Armstrong, pastor in Norfork, Virginia.[9] Hodge's account of the discussion on the floor begins with a brief account of their opposition to the majority report and moves on to the briefest of summaries of other remarks before giving his own views. As a commissioner, Robinson was present and in a position to report at first hand on the proceedings.

> Mr. Stuart Robinson, and Mr. Armstrong opposed the adoption of the [Majority Report], and the latter moved a substitute, which was substantially the report of the minority. Both these gentlemen expressed the opinion that there was a growing dissatisfaction with the working of our Boards. It was time, Mr. Robinson thought, to consider whether there was not a more excellent way....
>
> Several brethren from the West spoke with feelings, from their own experience of the necessity of greater exertion in this cause. Among them, Mr. Pawling, from western Missouri, Mr. Goodhue, from Illinois, Mr. Stafford, and others, made very effective appeals to the Assembly. Mr. Comfort, an elder, from Virginia, made a very forcible speech in defence of the Boards, denying, in behalf of the laity, any of those feelings of dis-

---

[9]George Dodd Armstrong was born in Mendham, Morris County, New Jersey, on September 15, 1813. Attending Nassau Hall (later the College of New Jersey and even later Princeton University) in 1832, he graduated from Union Theological Seminary in Virginia in 1837. He was professor of physical science at Washington College (now Washington and Lee) from 1837 to 1851, and Stated Supply of historic Timber Ridge Presbyterian Church from 1839 to 1851.

Dr. Armstrong's long service as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Norfolk, Virginia, began in 1851, and following eight years of retirement there he died in 1899.

satisfaction which a few of the ministers seemed to entertain.

Dr. Spring spoke with much effect on the same side.

Dr. Musgrave, Secretary of the Board, closed the debate by one of the ablest and most effective speeches delivered on the floor of the Assembly for a long time.

The paper given above was then adopted, with scarce a show of opposition.[10]

The Secretary had scored again; of this, more later, but not from Charles Hodge.

Hodge's comments on the Board discussions essentially repeat his positions expressed previously. He begins, however, with a strong sentence which sets forth his basic attitude: the Assembly's mind has been expressed clearly, and further debate is a waste of time. "The sense of the House was so strongly evinced in favour of the Boards, and in opposition to mere speculative objections to their existence, that we presume the controversy will not be renewed."

Hodge, continuing, would belittle the whole argument:

> It seems indeed unworthy of debate, whether the body appointed to carry on our benevolent operations be called a Committee, and be appointed by the Assembly, or whether it be called a Board. In the one case it would be a small body, in the other large. The former method has the advantage of simplicity, but in the latter has considerations in its favour which are not likely to lose their influence on the Church.[11]

The maintenance of a large Board is, in fact, something that Hodge continues to think important for the good of the

---

[10] Hodge, GA 1854, BRPR XXVI:3, July 1854, pp 559-560.

[11] The same, p 560.

work. What Breckinridge and Thornwell see as an empty show of no practical value, since most of the Board members never appear for the meetings, Hodge sees as good insurance.

> In the first place, they have been incorporated in our church policy for years, and a change, without adequate reason, is unbecoming and disparaging.[12]

This is the basic position of a true conservative. If Hodge and Thornwell are both conservatives, this is an entirely different kind of conservatism from Thornwell's.

But the Boards for Hodge also serve a positive function:

> In the second place, they are a neccessary intermediate agency between the Assembly and its executive officers.
>
> The Assembly cannot conduct its Theological Seminaries otherwise than through the intervention of a Board. It cannot attend the examinations, see to the fidelity of the professors, and the conduct of the students.
>
> Neither can it otherwise conduct with advantage its missionary or educational operations. It cannot inspect the action of the executive committee and secretaries. It cannot go into any minute examination of the wisdom of their appointments and disbursements.
>
> Some of us are old enough to remember, how our New-school brethren endeavoured to break down the missionary operations of the Assembly, by insisting that, if the Assembly undertook to conduct missions, it must go into all the details; it must sit in judgment on the qualifications of every missionary, and on the economy of every item of expenditure.
>
> They saw, what the Church, with few exceptions, now sees, that to abolish our Boards, is virtually to give up the whole work of missions and education.[13]

. . . . . .

---

[12] The same.

[13] The same. Paragraphing supplied.

Perhaps without realizing it, Hodge is moving a long step toward the Voluntary Society position.

> In a small, compact body like the Church of Scotland, with a permanent commission to refer to in every emergency, it may do for the Assembly to conduct all its operations by simple Committee. But, in a body as large and as widely extended as ours, a division of labour is absolutely necessary. You cannot send a great army on a foraging party, or to build a bridge.[14]

Hodge, without taking the space Thomas Smyth took in 1841-1842, is occupying much of the same ground. The Assembly cannot attend to the details, and therefore another body, the Board, must be provided to take care of them.

Hodge realizes that the Executive Committee of the Board is the practical, working, governing body of the operation. To prevent its being autonomous, which it will be to all effects if its only superintendent is the General Assembly which cannot superintend, the Board is essential:

> In the third place, the abolition of the Boards would throw a responsibility and power on the Executive Committees and Secretaries which they ought not to be entrusted with. Their accountability to a body like the General Assembly, which, from its nature, is incapable of effective inspection, would be merely nominal. The whole work would really be in the hands of a very few men, without real supervision and control.
>
> Our complaints against the management of the American Home Missionary Society, whose whole power was in the hands of a few men in New York, should make us sensible that any irresponsible power is a dangerous thing.
>
> And, not to prolong an unnecessary discussion, it may be remarked, that our Boards serve the purpose of break-waters. In calm weather they seem unnecessary and an incumbrance. But, when a storm comes, they are an

---

[14]The same, pp 560-561.

> essential protection. So long as everything goes on well, the responsibility of the Executive Committees to the Boards seems merely nominal; and one might be disposed to think they might as well be out of the way as not. But let any thing go wrong; let any emergency arise in which long examination into details is necessary, the existence of a body intermediate between the Committees and the Assembly becomes all-important.[15]

Up to this point Hodge has dealt with the practical aspects of Board operations. Now he shifts to the underlying theory. So far as reported in the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, Hodge's opponents on the floor of the Assembly had not entered into this area. We see that while largely silent over the years, Hodge has kept himself acquainted with the main outlines of the case against the Boards as developed by the objectors.

His language is disparaging in the extreme, and it is clear that he does not consider the church strictly bound by New Testament patterns any more than Smyth did.

> As to the objection that the Scriptures know nothing of Boards[, Charles Hodge concludes,] that they are not church courts, &c., we would only say, this is the jus divinum theory in its dotage. God has not sent his Church into the world as an infant in its swaddling clothes, without liberty of action; he has given her a work to do, which requires the free use of her limbs; and it will be found hard work to bind her with split hairs.[16]

The church has liberty of action. She is free in her work, not bound. Those who wish to see only New Testament precedents in Presbyterian church government are splitting

---

[15]The same. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[16]The same.

hairs. We may find Hodge using the phrase "divine right" favorably in connection with the Presbyterian system, but not in the sense he here intends, the sense employed by Breckinridge and Thornwell.

Thus Charles Hodge on the discussion of ecclesiastical Boards at the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1854; and thus Charles Hodge on Boards and their detractors: the detractors of Boards are hairsplitters who would bind the free church.

But as we have noted, Stuart Robinson, who was a fellow-Commissioner with Hodge at the Assembly, read Hodge's account and decided that it was time for what he viewed as propaganda to be replaced by what he viewed as fact.[17] Writing in The Southern Presbyterian Review for January, 1855, Robinson takes Hodge to task for misrepresenting the nature of the discussion held on the floor of the 1854 General Assembly, and particularly for blowing up its importance, in the form it took at the Assembly, out of all proportion to the facts. In a section entitled Boards of the Church, Robinson says that

> In connection with the matter of church extension, an incidental discussion arose, which, though in itself unimportant, and neither getting at the real merits of the question, nor leading to any practical results, has, since the Assembly, been made to occupy a conspicuous place in the proceedings.
>
> This instance, perhaps, as strongly as any other, is in illustration of the tendency already referred to, "to fancy issues made which were not, and battles won which were not fought."
>
> The paragraph in reference to this discussion,

---

[17] See above, pp 390-391.

in the annual article on the General Assembly, in the Repertory of July '54, pp. 560 and 561, is so remarkable in itself, has been so widely copied in the journals of the church, and brings into view so completely the topics, of which we desire very briefly to speak, --- that in order to more brevity, we take the liberty of using that paragraph as the foundation of what remains to be said, touching the Boards of the church, --- our only remaining topic.

Summing up the result of the discussion, the Repertory says, "The sense of the house was so strongly evinced in favour of the Boards, and in opposition to merely speculative objections to their existence, that we presume the controversy will not be renewed."[18]

In Robinson's eyes this paragraph is a completely misleading misrepresentation.

Now, there was no such "controversy" opened in the first instance, and no "objections to their existence," either speculative or practical. It so happens that in this case, we have not to rely for proof of this fact, upon the mere absence of any such opinions in the reported debates, --- but the two gentlemen who are named as the parties in opposition to the Board, have furnished positive proof in their own utter denials.

Mr. Armstrong has since felt called upon to deny formally, in the Presbyterian, that he ever was opposed to the existence of the Boards.

Mr. Robinson, at the close of this very discussion, complaining that he had been precluded by the previous question from repelling as misrepresentation, the charge that he was an enemy of the Boards, --- asked leave to offer Resolutions, not for action, but record, --- (and singularly enough the request failed, from the objection of the Secretary of the Board of Missions, whose misapprehensions they corrected,) --- Resolutions which he

---

[18] [Stuart Robinson,] "The General Assembly of 1854," The Southern Presbyterian Review, VIII:1, January 1855, pp 443-444. Additional paragraphing supplied. Robinson, in adding the italics, accurately emphasizes Hodge's main point.

had previously read, but not offered, and which he declared,[19] set forth fully all his "heresies" on this subject.

Robinson's resolutions aimed not at the abolition of the Boards, their author tells us, but at their reform.

> These Resolutions, so far from expressing opposition to the existence of the Boards, purport to aim at "the diversity of views touching the efficiency of the Boards as now organized and located," "which diversity of views tends to impair and embarrass the action of the Boards," --- and suggest an inquiry as to three points:
>
> 1. Simplifying the form of the Boards to correspond with the fact, that they are Committees of the Assembly.
>
> 2. Requiring the Boards to act simply as organs and agents of the Presbyteries, not having to do with the concerns of individual Missionaries.
>
> 3. The expediency of locating the Boards at different centres.
>
> So far as the two gentlemen named are concerned, therefore, they were parties to no such controversy.
>
> The Reports of debates, clearly show that neither Dr. Breckenridge nor Dr. Adger, were parties to such a controversy, at this or any other stage of the proceedings. On the contrary, the Boards found in the former a true helper and friend, as they had before found him.[20]

It will be remembered that one of the especially galling features of the Board system, to the opponents of the Boards, is the reluctance of the Boards' supporters to have the question debated, or even raised at all.[21] Robinson feels

---

[19] The same, p 444. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[20] The same, pp 444-445. Additional paragraphing supplied.

[21] See above, p 139.

that the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review has furnished a prime example of this suppression syndrome.

> But, whether such a controversy was had in the Assembly or not, if the paragraph of the Repertory be the true exponent of the views of those who claim to be the special friends of the Boards, we venture to predict that events will show that never was there a presumption more unfounded, than "that the controversy will not be renewed."
>
> It is singular to observe how, in this language of the Repertory, is brought out again the idea which ever seems prominent in the minds of many of the leaders in these measures of the church, --- that of all other evils to the Boards and the church, discussion, controversy, is to be feared, and quiet acquiescence to be of all blessings desired.[22]

Furthermore, this desire to suppress criticism of the Boards was, in Robinson's personal memory of their remarks, a distinctive feature of the tone and tactics of those who spoke on behalf of the Boards at the Assembly.

> The speakers on this subject in the Assembly, held the same tone, and for that chiefly, are lauded in the Repertory. "Dr. Musgrove," we are told, "closed the debate, by one of the most effective speeches delivered on the floor of the Assembly for a long time."[23]

To add insult to injury, Robinson feels, the defenders of the Boards forced the previous question "by preconcert in face of the worthy Chairman of the Committee, (Dr. Adger,) and his parliamentary rights in the discussion of his own report."[24] Yet the great speech from Dr. Musgrove, Robinson

---

[22] [Stuart Robinson,] "The General Assembly of 1854," The Southern Presbyterian Review, VIII:1, January 1855, p 445. Paragraphing supplied.

[23] The same.

[24] The same.

reports, "contains but three points relating to the general question, [and one of those is no more than] the implied logic of the question, 'Why do they not say what is wrong, -- and not bring vague charges?'"[25]

To this, says Robinson, the answer is very simple.

> [A] most satisfactory answer[, he deserves] is found in the incident just alluded to, --- the fact, that the "previous question," was the peroration of this discourse.[26]

Robinson takes issue with Musgrove's other points, but the argument itself in his mind is not nearly so important as the fact that those who are for the Boards are for them as they stand, and try to choke off any discussion even of ways they might be improved.

> The chief purpose, however, of these illustrations, is to present prominently, the single point, of the seeming aversion of the more prominent advocates of the present measures of the Boards, to all such discussion, --- this being the marked characteristic of the tone, both of the speakers referred to, and of the Repertory.[27]

Returning to Hodge's discussion in the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, Robinson notes carefully the further disparaging remark from Princeton -- that

---

[25]The same.

[26]The same.

[27]The same, p 446. Paragraphing supplied. For illustrations of the continuing nature of this problem, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, pp 413-414. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

"It seems, indeed, unworthy of debate, whether the body, &c., be called a Committee, and be appointed by the Assembly, or whether it be called a Board. In the one case, it would be a small body in the large."

This we take to mean, that the Board, as now organized, is simply a large Committee of the Assembly, nothing else, and it is "unworthy of debate," whether a Committee be large or small.

But have the advocates of simple Committees never made any other demand than simply, a smaller Board? The Repertory need not be reminded that a Committee, constituted of Presidents and Vice-Presidents, --- under charter of incorporation, --- a Committee in which membership may be bought for thirty dollars, and "directorship," (a singular function in a Committee man,) for fifty dollars, is something out of the usual order of a Committee of a church court.[28]

Robinson finds that as Hodge proceeds further into his remarks on the Boards, he puts Princeton into what Robinson considers to be a corner:

After thus stating the case, as simply between a Committee, large or small, the Repertory itself, proceeds to argue the advantage of a Board over a "simple Committee," --- as protecting the church against the effects of throwing "a responsibility and power on the Executive Committee which they ought not to be entrusted with;" as "serving the purpose of breakwaters" &c., --- and finally, that the objection to the Boards that they are not church courts, is the "jus divinum theory in its dotage." Now, it is plain, that after thus comparing the several descriptions here given of Boards, the first and most difficult question to decide, --- is the Board a Committee or not?[29]

This brings the debate straight back to its original

---

[28] [Stuart Robinson,] "The General Assembly of 1854," The Southern Presbyterian Review, VIII:1, January 1855, p 446. Paragraphing supplied.

[29] The same, pp 446-447. Paragraphing supplied.

terms, Stuart Robinson argues.

> Nor is this an unimportant question, since in this is involved the question, is "the church a Missionary Society? --- competent in her organized capacity, and provided in her constitution, with all the agencies for carrying on her work. Or, is the Presbyterian Church, in this respect, no better off than the Independency, out of the defects of which grow up voluntary societies.
>
> This is the true issue involved in the old controversy between voluntary societies and Ecclesiastical Boards. The question of reporting or not reporting annually, to the General Assembly, of Directors appointed by the Assembly, or a close corporation, --- is a minor question compared with the other.[30]

Once back to the fundamental question, considered agreed on in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America ever since the departure of the New School adherents of Voluntary Societies in 1838, to Robinson Hodge appears to be on the shakiest of ground if he admits, as he does, that there is anything tenuous about the General Assembly's oversight and control of her Boards.

> Strangely enough the Repertory makes the admission, that "the accountability of an Executive Committee," (and, by parity of reasoning, of a Board,) to a body like the General Assembly, --- a body, from its nature, incapable of effective inspection, would be merely nominal."
>
> And again, "so long as everything goes on well, the responsibility of the Executive Committee is merely nominal."
>
> This admission gives up, practically, the whole ground once held as against voluntaryism, --- and at the same time admits that the Boards are not Committees of the Assembly, but "a body intermediate between the Committees and the Assembly."
>
> If so, then, the Boards are something extra to the

---

[30] The same, p 447. Paragraphing supplied.

> system of our church, and but a white-washed, --- or rather, faintly blue-washed variety of the voluntary society; and then the whole question involved in the controversy of 1835 to 1838, would "seem to be, indeed, unworthy of debate."[31]

Charles Hodge, we discover, does not command automatic respect from the vigorous Stuart Robinson, the man who was dropped so hard on his head when an infant that the doctors despaired of his life. Robinson had recovered, marked with a life-long limp and deformity, and in his struggle to overcome his physical handicaps his unimpaired mind has learned to fear no one. What Hodge had written impresses Robinson not very well at all. He closes his review of the Princeton view of the 1854 General Assembly with a blunt remark.

> Let the true issues on this subject be clearly and distinctly brought out before the church --- Are our Boards simply Committees of the Assembly, representing the church in her organized capacity, working through her constitutional agencies?
>
> If so, then let us not speak "half the speech of Ashdod, and according to the language of each people." Our objection to the paragraph of the Repertory, is precisely that of the Ancient Reformer, in Israel, to the mongrel tongue, --- and for precisely the same reasons.[32]

We may doubt if Hodge will be convinced by Robinson's arguments, and we may wonder if this peroration will perhaps impel Charles Hodge of Princeton to a more emotional attachment to his own position than might otherwise have been the case had Robinson been a calmer writer. We remember that Smyth and Thornwell were blunt, even Scripturally blunt on

---

[31]The same.

[32]The same, pp 447-448. Paragraphing supplied.

occasion, but we remember too that their choice of Scripture stopped short of some of the harsher things available there for use on one's opposition.

We can predict for Stuart Robinson, perhaps, an exciting life.

When we learn that the General Assembly of 1855 is to meet in Nashville, Tennessee, and that both James Henley Thornwell and Benjamin Mosby Smith will be there as commissioners, we begin to wonder if we might not do well to go out to Pittsburgh and take steamboat for what will one day be advertising herself as the Athens of the South, only to reach the incalculably dizzier height of becoming the Country Music Capital of the known universe.

On a brief side trip across the river from Nashville we can see the church Old Hickory joined on profession of faith,[33] and already we are curious to see the unmatched authentic Egyptian interior of Nashville's newest and largest Presbyterian church structure. It is an added attraction.[34]

---

[33]Spencer C. Murray, Presbyterians of Old Hickory, p 13. The American Presbyterian [Nashville], July 19, 1838, gives an account by the Reverend John T. Edgar of the occasion, which took place three days before Edgar wrote down his narrative.

[34]For a picture of the large and commodious building, whose cornerstone was laid on April 28, 1849, and whose dedication service took place on Easter Sunday, April 20, 1851, see the frontispiece of The First Prebyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee: The Addresses Delivered in Connection with the Observance of the One Hundredth Anniversary, November 8-15, 1914.

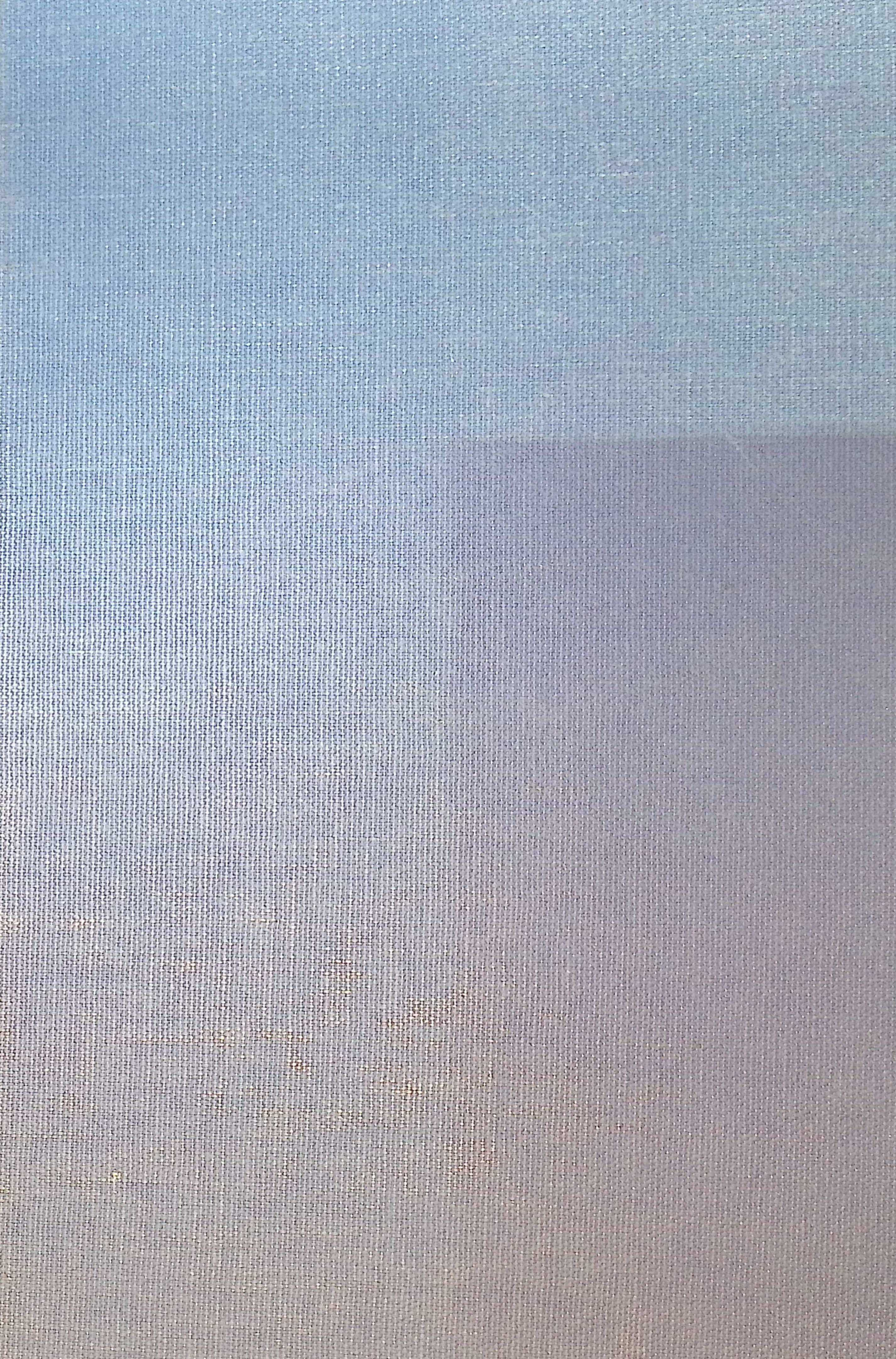
For a picture of its interior, see the Manuscript History of the First Presbyterian Church of Nashville, Tennessee, Manuscript Local Church History Collection, in the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

When we learn that William Swan Plumer and Henry A. Boardman will be there too, we start to pack our trunks. For all of Hodge's hopes, the debate may be far from over.

Besides, it will be interesting to see if a meeting in the midwestern South will have any effect on the underground currents of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

Packed up for the weeks of travel and meetings which our attendance on the Assembly will require of us, we arrange our affairs.

We set out.

As our riverboat eases us along towards our destination, we take advantage of the interlude to review in our minds Thornwell's development since we first saw him as a young man full of fresh enthusiasm for a change in Presbyterian benevolent operations.

And as the warm pleasant miles slip by, we think over the course of the running debate. Has an identifiable pattern emerged in the arguments pressed in favor of such changes?